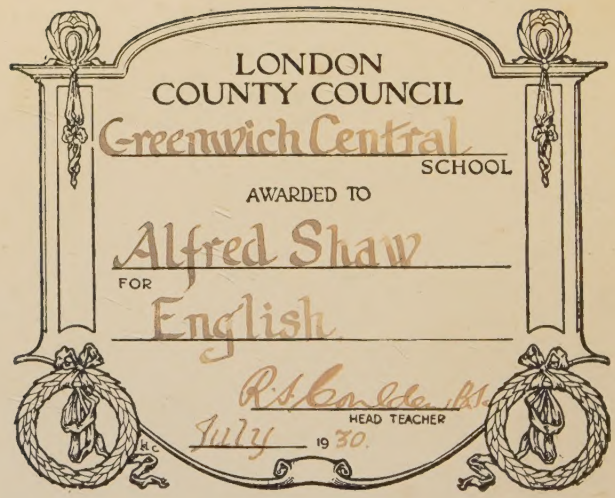
NEAME OF KENT

FRANK DILNOT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NEAME OF KENT

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BY

FRANK DILNOT

NEAME of Kent is the romance of a seventeenth century yeoman who brings to his narrative a vivid picture of life and character in Stuart times. From the prosperous farm of Splicing Oaks—a happy world of its own—a young man is thrust into a welter of adventure and intrigue, challenges sour-faced Puritans and overbearing Cavaliers, fights for his own land in the country and then in London. His exploits are sustained by an uncommon and charming love story.

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FRANK DILNOT

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THE YEOMAN

" His outside is an ancient yeoman of England, though his inside may give arms (with the best gentleman) and n'er see the herald. There is no truer servant in the house than himself. Though he be master he says not to his servants, ' Go to field,' but ' Let us go ': and with his own eye doth both fatten his flock, and set forward all manner of husbandry. He is taught by nature to be contented with a little: his own fold yields him both food and raiment: he is pleased with any nourishment God sends, while curious gluttony ransacks, as it were, Noah's ark for food, only to feed the riot of one meal. He is ne'er known to go to law; understanding to be law-bound among men, is like to be hide-bound among his beasts; they thrive not under it; and that such men sleep as unquietly, as if their pillows were stuffed with lawyers' penknives.

" When he builds, no poor tenant's cottage hinders his prospect; they are indeed his almshouses though there be painted on them no such superscription. He never sits up late but when he hunts the badger, the vowed foe of his lambs: nor uses he any cruelty but when he hunts the hare; not subtlety but when he setteth snares for the snipe or pitfalls for the blackbird, nor oppression but when in the month of July he goes to the next river and shears his sheep. He allows of honest pastime, and thinks not the bones of the dead anything bruised, or the worse for

it, though the country lasses dance in the churchyard after evensong. Rock Monday, and the wake in summer, shrovings, the wakeful ketches on Christmas Eve, the hockey or seed cake, these he yearly keeps, yet holds them no relics of popery.

" He is not so inquisitive after news derived from the privy closet, when the finding an aerie of hawks in his own ground, or the foaling of a colt come of good strain are tidings more pleasant, more profitable. He is lord paramount within himself, though he hold by never so mean a tenure. . . .

" Lastly to end him: he cares not when his end comes, he needs not fear his audit, for his quietus is in Heaven."

Sir Thomas Overbury, (1615).

NEAME OF KENT

CHAPTER ONE

THE EPISODE AT THE KING'S SCHOOL

TO make plain the story of how, as a young countryman, I was thrown without my own design, and indeed against my will, into those disturbances and struggles which for a period broke up the placid life of England, I have to begin with the occurrences at the King's School, and must take you for a space to Splicing Oaks Farm, because it was these early events and surroundings which led to my being caught up like a leaf in the storm.

The clouds were already gathering over the land, common people muttering and the great lords intriguing, when, as a boy of twelve, in the year 1629, I set out for the old school at Canterbury. But fateful trendings were far from me that April morning, with the primroses and bluebells in the woods, with thrushes and finches chorusing the sunshine, the whitethorn in bud, the apple trees in blossom and over all the fluctuating scents of Spring. I was starting forth to a new life. Though the road was but twelve miles to Canterbury, it was twelve hundred in my heart. As I stood holding the bridle of my nag, Tarragon, waiting for father and Will Dyson, and I heard

the clucking of the fowls, the lowing of Rumble so recently calved, the rattle of the harrows as Dick Rymer made his way to the five-acre fallow, all the courage went out of me, and when my mother put her arms round me and for the first time in my life I saw tears coming down her cheeks, I had to pretend that Tarragon wrenched me away from her.

My father, mounted on the big grey, came round from the side of the house, a great strong figure with wide-brimmed hat and boots to his knees like any gentleman. You could never see my father without getting from him some part of his own radiant strength, at least I never could. Close behind him rode Will Dyson, our head man on the farm, his cunning humorous little face wrinkling in the effort to balance on the front of his saddle the package containing my extra clothes and the hamper with the two young ducks and the ham, a present for Master John Ludd at the school-house, which my mother thought might soften the initial rigours of discipline. Father had laughed hard-heartedly about this on the night before: "I have known John Ludd these twenty years, and likely as not a flogging to start with will show Geoffrey there is no favour to be bought by flesh or fowl from Splicing Oaks or elsewhere."

My mother was untroubled, for she knew, that had I been thus welcomed, all the learning and high position of Master John Ludd would not have saved him from the swift temper and strong hand of the most lusty yeoman in East Kent. Besides, John Ludd was my father's friend; my mother argued the ducks and the ham were in no wise out of place.

On the way across the meadows before we came upon the high road to Canterbury, father pointed out the growing wheat on our left where he was to save a land for me

to cut with the sickle when I came home for the summer holidays, and then later beneath the burgeoning elms by the roadside and the skylarks carolling high above them, he told me more about life at Canterbury, of the hopes of mother and himself that I should shine at school in order they might presently send me to Trinity College, Cambridge, as they could well afford to do; so that thus there would come to be a Neame who, in learning and in manners, could comport himself with the gentlefolk. "Two hundred and ten acres—the best arable meadow and woodland in Kent—in our family over three hundred years, Geoffrey, and ever becoming more valuable, and you will get a station better far than your forebears, though nought of them could be despised." My father threw back that head of his.

"I reckon as how spelling and foreign languages will teach Geoffrey to shoot straighter at the rabbits," said Will Dyson.

"Fool," said my father sharply; "you look out you don't drop those ducks."

With meekness Will Dyson freshly balanced his load, but he broke forth again within five minutes.

"What do they teach besides foreign languages at school you be going to, Geoffrey?"

"Parson Blechynden told me about Latin and Greek."

"Things you never heard of, Will," said my father.

"I reckon they must teach how to make a bran mash or twist a hay bond, or milking."

Father shook his head impatiently.

"Thatching then, or building a rick, or cutting spars, or using a flail? Surely they teach you how to use a flail."

"Dolt," cried father, "they teach nothing but learning at these schools."

"Aye," said Will Dyson. He leant forward and patted the neck of the sorrel.

It was late in the day when we reached the city and I was taken straight to a pleasant residence near the Dungell and the Butts. Master Bevin, a brewster, bought many of my father's hops and he and Mistress Bevin were to house me while I was at school. A homely, kindly couple I found them from the start, and for the four years and more I was at Canterbury (taking out the good holidays at home) they made me feel as much like a son of their own as might be expected from man and wife with no children who had always wanted them badly.

Thus was I installed at Canterbury, where I stayed for those peaceful boyhood years while what one party called treason and the other patriotism seethed and increased throughout the land. Little we boys knew or cared about the talk and commotions outside our own tiny world; for growing lads who have to be at their studies by seven in the morning, the younger ones wrestling with the accidence, and thence upward through the classes to the Greek testament and the Hebrew grammar—why these lads had troubles of their own which left them scant room for alternative reflections beyond the mid-day and evening play-time, and whether there would be pasties for supper.

And here let me record how I steadfastly worked towards the ambition of my father and mother, that I might, with a proper equipment on leaving the King's School, proceed to Cambridge, and no one but myself can know the wearying and painful labour it cost me to journey from one form to another. Memorising was always difficult for me and this caused me to be looked upon as heavy in class. It should not be thought—I say it myself—that I was without brains, only they were

not scholastic ones. I had a gift for expedient, could twist an English sentence—or a sentiment—quite deftly, and once Master Ludd was pleased to say with a smile that I might conceivably some day develop a morsel of wit. Moreover, I was quick enough with brains where brains called for action and I stood well with the boys, for none of my age was more fleet of foot, more adept at the jumping, more effective with the quarter staff.

I grew apace in body if not in mind, and by the time I was sixteen and in the eighth form I was five feet eleven inches in height, and weighed a hundred and fifty pounds, facts which have a bearing on that sudden finish of my school life, which made me a topic, in the taverns, as well as in the Chapter House.

When we came back from summer holidays, following the completion of my fourth year at the school, we found that Master Samuel Raven, the usher, had been licensed as a curate to Molash, and that in his place was a young man named Jasper Herrill, whom we boys began to dislike heartily after about the third day. He had a sallow face, burning bright eyes and the softest voice that ever dropped bitter words. We elder boys saw quickly enough that he had no use for any of us except as an irritating and humiliating means of making a livelihood—a necessity forced by unjust fate on a younger son. As I was to know in time to come, he was of truly good family and no one could doubt his enriched mind, and these two things together had been sufficient to secure him the appointment as usher. He must have needed the post urgently, and yet when he had secured it he was filled with loathing—loathing of himself and of what he had to do. We boys suffered. Our hesitations and stumbles in lessons gave him opportunity not only for occasional bullets of abuse, but for a running ridicule

of one individual after another which galled and seared those who were old enough to understand, and frightened the younger boys. We could have seen but one side of Jasper Herrill, for no man is so wholly malignant as he appeared to us. He had not any mercy for even the slighter offences. Punishment seemed to give him more satisfaction than instruction. And yet, incredible as it was even with the evidence of my own eyes and ears, I was present more than once when a transformed Jasper Herrill talked with Master Ludd—a young man with face full of enthusiasm and gentleness, beating some persuasion home with long white fore-finger, listening with those wonderful eyes of his alight as Master Ludd, quick to respond to argument touched with humour, talked back in kind. I am not of those who can explain the mysteries of personality: I present the man as I saw him.

As slow to aversion as I was to affection, I nevertheless hated Jasper Herrill whole-heartedly before he began to make of me a special butt.

"Neame, you have somewhat the appearance of an ox, and at middle age you may have risen to the intelligence of an ox. Do not lose hope; keep on trying." Sometimes he would shake his head at me slowly and mournfully. "The misdirection of natural faculties is one of the tragedies in human history, Neame. Here are you trying to build verbs when you ought to be building muck heaps outside a herdsman's cottage." Once he sent for the youngest boy in the school and directed him to instruct me in some elemental rule of parsing—this in the presence of the eighth form, of which I was one of the leaders.

The end of it all came out of doors in the September sunshine, one day after morning school. The Mint

adjoining the school building was where we took our play-time morning and evening—the arena for prisoners' base or football or rounders. On this morning school had but just broken and seniors and juniors together were still passing out into the yard when Herrill came forth with some books under his arm and ran his eye over the emerging boys. One of them, a little fellow of eleven, named Roger Dickson, had begun to trundle a hoop when Herrill called to him, no doubt for the purpose of some errand. Roger did not hear the call and ran on smiting his hoop, whereupon Herrill shouted again, and Roger, without looking round, believing that one of the boys was challenging him, returned a saucy answer. Herrill put down his books by the side of the school-house door and strode into the yard and intercepted the child—he was nothing more. Without a word he cuffed him by the side of the head and sent him to the ground.

"Get up," said Herrill, and when the little chap was on his feet, he struck him on the other side of the head and again sent him to the ground, where he lay with his face in his hands, crying bitterly.

The other boys, big and small, were gathering round in a circle as I, with a mixture of feelings which left no room for fear, broke through them and without a thought of consequences, dealt Herrill a cuff on the side of the head at least as hearty as the one Roger Dickson had received, and as he reeled I gave him one on the other side of the head to balance him.

In an eventful life I have witnessed and weighed the emotions of many men, but never have I seen such surprise as was displayed on the face of Jasper Herrill at my attack. It was like a thunderbolt from blue sky.

"What, the country bumpkin!" he exclaimed and

ran in on me with amazing swiftness. He was trained in arms and feats of skill, and it must have been a piece of happy luck, as well as my quickness of foot, that enabled me to escape him. I snatched from Roger Dickson, now on his feet, the thick wooden hoop stick, and as Herrill, lithe and furious, came at me once more, I struck him first across the face and then on the top of the skull with all my might.

"That for country, and that for bumpkin," I said, and as he crumpled up at my feet, my one great hope was that I had killed him.

They carried him in, the porter and some of the bigger boys, and I remember seeing his legs dangling loose as they bore him through the doorway to the usher's house. I was conscious that Master Ludd, hurriedly summoned, passed with great strides through the Mint and followed the procession. Round me many boys were still gathered, some almost breathless with a frightened excitement, a few counselling me to flight.

I had hardly ceased my panting, the perspiration was wet on my forehead and my hand was still ashake—but not with fear—when Master Ludd came out, raised his arm with a beckoning gesture and walked over to his own house. I went behind him and he led the way without a word into that comfortable oak-lined parlour where once or twice I had suffered correction with the birch, where many times I had listened to fatherly counsel on life and helpful advice about my books. I can see Master Ludd now, his portly figure, his black gown with spreading white band over a worn silken doublet, his trim grey beard, his curly hair well receded from his forehead, his blue eyes, usually so genial, now grave and anxious.

"Geoffrey, this is a terrible thing. What made you do it?"

"He hit Roger Dickson," was all I could say.

"It means expulsion for you."

"Expulsion."

"And that is not the worst. If he should die——"

"I did not hit him hard enough for that."

Master Ludd surveyed me sorrowfully, and in the pause there was a knock at the door, and the Dean came in—a middle-aged man with thin neck and close-set eyes. One quick glance only did he yield me, and then he turned to Master Ludd.

"The surgeon thinks his skull may be broken."

"Bad; bad, indeed," and I knew the headmaster was thinking not so much of Jasper Herrill as of me.

"We must keep this boy."

"I have sent for his father."

"His father?" said the Dean sharply. "This is a Cathedral matter. He is practically a grown man."

There was more talk, the Dean wishing to hand me over to City officers for safe custody, Master Ludd striving for a way out against such indignity.

"I'll stay here," I volunteered.

The Dean raspingly commanded silence, "A shut mouth will suit you best."

When, after much discussion, they went out, it was, I am certain, the Dean who turned the key in the lock of the big oak door.

After they had gone I sank into a chair with desolation in my soul. I saw now that even if Herrill lived my father and mother would be broken-hearted.

Curious that in those hours of suffering in Master Ludd's parlour I had no thought of pity for the man I had brought within touch of the grave, curious too,—

I can say it with truth—that I felt no touch of commiseration with myself—nought but despair at the misery at Splicing Oaks. When I forced myself to reflect on what might happen if Herrill died and a faint vision of the hangman's rope and the dread window of the Gate House came to me, it seemed such an unbelievable happening that I had in me no active dread—only a certain cold surprise at the possibility. But presently I had real fear. I could not bear to think of what would happen when my father came. His anger could be furnace-like, and of his anger I had no doubt. What would he say to the son from whom he had hoped so much? Well did I know his strain of Roman hardness.

I shall, till the day of my death, recall the thrill with which, after hours of torturing reiteration, I heard the big front door open and shut, heard loud voices, and a minute later was face to face with my father. Behind him was the Dean, and Master Ludd, and a third man in the shadow.

"Geoffrey!"

Here was no anger. That great rough man rushed at me and took me in his arms as though I were a little child.

"I couldn't help it, father, he hit——"

"I know, I know," he cried; and he put one hand on my shoulder and with the other smoothed my hair. "Don't you worry, boy, father's here."

He swept round on those behind him. "You've dared to prison my son."

"We dare to do our duty, and shall so continue."

It was the Dean stepping forward. I have to say here that he was one of the few men I ever met who could face my father roused.

" I'll teach you about duty."

" Explain yourself, and quick about it."

" Careful, for the boy's sake," urged Master Ludd.

" Careful! "

My father was glaring at them both.

" Hear this," said the Dean, " your son has committed an assault like to prove murder at the school, with care of which we are charged. The Cathedral, and perchance the City, will judge the matter. I speak for the Chapter and I speak for the Archbishop."

Like thunder came my father's reply.

" I speak for John Neame of Splicing Oaks Farm. If within five minutes my son and I are not out of this room unhindered I'll set loose a scandal for the King's School and the Cathedral which will make the chastisement of a lousy weasel of no account whatever."

" You threaten us? " said the Dean.

" Say the word quick, master," came in a squeaky voice from the third man who had hitherto been partly hidden between the Dean and Master Ludd. It was Will Dyson. I rushed to him and clasped his horny hand.

" Come, Geoffrey," said my father as he stepped towards the door. " A hand lifted or a voice raised——"

The Dean had common sense and he stood away from the door. " Understand, John Neame, that at this moment your son, by my authority, is under arrest."

" Those who want my son had better come and try to take him."

My father's voice might have shaken out the window.

" The horses are all ready outside ' The Checkers,' master," chirruped Will Dyson.

The last memory I had of that room was Master Ludd

holding tightly to the Dean's cloak as the latter struggled to get into the hall with us.

Five minutes later we were riding out of Canterbury, each with a stout ash staff in his hand, carefully provided by Will Dyson.

"Father," I said, "I'm sorry about Cambridge."

"I am thanking God I've a man for a son instead of a scholar," he replied.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIGHT AT THE WEST GATE

DUSK was softening the outlines of the farm as Will Dyson dismounted to open the gate of the home lane, and lights were twinkling about the house two hundred yards ahead. I knew that hidden within the shade of the homestead was perturbation and suspense, mother and Joan, my sister, making believe at work, the men hanging about beyond their usual time and Lizzie Barton, who helped in the kitchen, talking forty to the dozen in her anxiety.

Will Dyson hopped to his saddle, we struck the horses to a trot and father sent forth a huge shout to herald us, and a minute later, as we turned the bend, we saw a small white-aproned figure, half stumbling, half running to us up the side of the quick-set hedge. I jumped from my horse and sprang forward and took my mother into my arms while she tried to say things but couldn't, and trembled as she held closely to me and pressed her head against my shoulder. Father, coming up, declared that there was nothing to make a fuss about.

We walked up to the house together, my mother in a jumble of questions and Will Dyson behind uttering reflections on the uselessness and danger of all schools.

By the time we reached the open space leading to the front door other welcomes were on me. Ned Tulks and Dick Sefton had waved from the side path, and I had motioned them to come up. Jim, the sheep dog, was

leaping and barking round the group. From the stables came John Ridley, forgetting to leave behind the bucket of water he was taking to the old mare. Thompson, made of sturdier stuff, finished fastening the three calves in the pen before, with grimed boots and hands hardly cleaner, he came over and with a nod stated that he was glad I had returned because of the pig-killing the following week. I went indoors with Joan hanging on my arm.

Our living-room, which some have named the hall, but which father always called the kitchen, looked to me that evening the very heart of home. It was long, some thirty feet, by half that in width, floored with red bricks, the walls panelled in oak half way up, and above them the beams showing through the plaster to the ceiling. In the great fireplace, crackling logs added to the light of the dozens of candles—for there was recklessness of tallow as well as other extravagance that night. The place was redolent of good things to eat. Sides of bacon were in the chimney corner, and along by the wall under the window big baskets of Catherine pears plucked a day or two before; suspended from the ceiling beams were hams, a haunch of venison and bunches of dried herbs, of which I specially remember the thyme and the tansy.

My father, standing by the big table on which he had flung his hat and cloak, spoke loudly for those who clustered outside the door as well as those within. "All of you here to supper. What have we to eat, Mother?" and when the reply came that there was a basket of trout, a cold roast sucking pig, venison pasties, and already in the oven a goose stuffed with chestnuts, and that there were pancakes and mince pies to follow, my father turned to Will Dyson and told him to tap a barrel of the strong beer down in the cellar.

The meal when it came, Ned Tulks having lent a helpful hand to the women, was marked by a jollity almost equal to that of a Harvest Home and was noteworthy because my father made the first and only speech in his life. He rose when the mince pies were going round. "Listen to this everyone. Geoffrey is here to live. From now on you'll take his orders as you do mine. He thrashed a bullying brock of a school usher to-day. They say the man is like to die. They talk of sending here to arrest Geoffrey."

There was a hush in the merriment. My father's words brought all to a halt. One or two of the men helped themselves to some more beer. Then Lizzie Barton got up suddenly from the end of the table, came to me, put her arms round my neck and kissed me first on one cheek and then on the other, and I was disgusted that she should be so bold, for she was forty and very plain to look at. But what she did was in some way answer to my father, and there was instantly shouting and laughter, and a loud uncouth word or two from Ned Tulks and Thompson, and a great deal of hammering on the table and stamping of feet. My father thereupon wiped away all seriousness by shaking a finger at me and saying in a voice that all might hear, "And you not more than a boy in years!" at which Lizzie Barton covered her face with her hands and seemed as though she would like to get under the table, and fun spouted like the streamlet by the withies in March.

Amid the laughter Will Dyson stood up and gave a song which he said had come to him by reason of the passage between Lizzie Barton and the young master: it was really an old rhyme artfully altered by Will in a word or two:

" I am my father's eldest son,
My mother eke doth love me well
My manlike duties I have done
And now I look me for a girl."

He deepened the chorus,

" Wherefore cease off make no ado
And if you'll love me love me noo
For I can't come every day to woo."

Four verses were to follow and four times they all sang the chorus with a zestful roar until at the end Lizzie Barton fled in distress to the outer kitchen.

Such was my homecoming, the preface to another chapter in my life. For a day or two I was in or around the house and father found occupation for himself and the men in the near neighbourhood. Then Will Dyson went on an expedition of enquiry to Canterbury and came back with the news that Jasper Herrill was recovering, that any thought of punishing me was abandoned, and that among many of the people of the city I was regarded not so much as a young ruffian as a hero.

From thence on I joined in the labour of the farm—just as my father himself did—and by degrees and with due humility under tuition I progressed in the slow skill of the soil not known and therefore sometimes derided by town dwellers. The boy who can drive a herd of cows is not the man who can cut hay from the rick and truss it; and the one who ploughs a straight furrow (no poor achievement in itself) may yet be unable to build, or what is even more, to thatch a rick of wheat.

To decide when the barley was exactly right for cutting, what price we should take for the hops, the number of heifers (if any) we should retain in the spring, to what

extent we should use the newly-introduced root crop of turnips instead of the usual third year fallow—these and similar problems were matters of high judgment on which the decision of my father (and his reasons carefully explained) gave me an education probably not less important in the longer view than that which I should have derived from Trinity College, Cambridge in regard to other matters. No month passed without its lessons. Who more patient and successful in the management of foaling mares than gruff old Thompson? Who more expert in the felling and faggotting in the wood than Ned Tulks? Will Dyson taught me how to make the cows respond to call by name, the art of selecting and storing apples and pears for winter use, how to kill a pig and after the scalding to cut it up. I was in training though I knew it not, and I loved the work and was helped by a natural strength and agility. In my second summer at home I was building the sheaves of wheat on the wains in the harvest field, which speaks for itself.

It was on the 25th of November in the year 1641 that father and Will Dyson and I set out for the market at Canterbury, as was the custom with us now nearly every month. I had grown to man's estate if not with a full measure of wisdom at least with more than my share of physical endowment, for I was six feet four inches in height, with a great spread of shoulder. Right hand by this time to my father he made me more and more a companion, and he quite openly was vain of my strength and growth. On all his journeys, generally to Canterbury, but occasionally to Maidstone, and once as far afield as Faversham, I went by his side. Frequently Will Dyson was with us, and we took him to Canterbury because we expected to buy some heifers which he could drive home by himself on the following day.

I have often thought since of that dark, sleety morning, when after a good breakfast at six o'clock, we set our horses northward, father and I with our cloaks fastened up to our ears, and Will with a piece of sacking tied to cover his head and shoulders. The cold drove in on us and made us silent, but I do not suppose there were three men in the whole of Kent who could more truly be described as carefree. Strong and healthy were we, the price of wheat was high, Splicing Oaks was prosperous, and if the ambitions of father and myself were limited our satisfactions were many and continuous. The same in a different and lesser degree might be said of Will Dyson: and yet we three men with no worry on earth (beyond the early morning rawness) were within a few hours to make touch with that red line which runs haphazard through the affairs of men and women, missing some who are clearly dangerous and in danger, diverging unerringly to others who, in their simple lives and actions, are to all appearances beyond the reach of peril.

The incident at "The Fleur de Lis," the beginning of the trouble, was not witnessed by me or Will, for we went down to the market leaving father to finish his dinner in comfort with an extra quart of ale and the company of old Farmer Whysall, of Nonnington. We had been late in sitting down, and the sprinkling of farmers and dealers and a couple of sedate merchants were on the move before us. As Will and I with others were going out through the hall there was a bustle at the entrance in High Street and we saw two young men dismount and hand their horses over to the ostler. Elegantly dressed, each wore a sword, and they were laughing loudly as if at some jest one or the other had made, and the ostler as he led the horses to the yard told Will

they were Sir John Manny, of Maidstone, and Sir Leonard Farnaby, of Kippington.

The quality and price of the heifers, in which we were much disappointed, occupied us for the next two hours and we went back to " The Fleur de Lis " with word of an empty errand. We found father with Farmer Whysall and Host Paramor in the latter's parlour, and we soon knew that the loss of the heifers was something upon which we need not waste an explanation. Here was the story, told as piecemeal, with many ejaculations and not a few oaths.

Sir John Manny and Sir Leonard Farnaby took places at the head of the long dining table, with a nod to my father and Farmer Whysall at the other end of it, and, calling Host Paramor, they ordered the best meal the inn could serve as well as two bottles of canary. Then they fell to talk between themselves of the in and out loyalty of Sir John Culpepper, the foolishness of Charles in not overawing Parliament with soldiers from the north and the low treachery of greedy London merchants. The canary both loosened and strengthened their tongues, and as their imperiousness grew they looked more than once with disapproval at father and Farmer Whysall, who, not by any means in whispers, went on with their conversation about the prospects for hops, quite unheeding the newcomers. The young men, like some of their kind, gentry by birth but not by nature, were grieved that they were not accorded a measure of deference which would have been shown by comparative silence on the part of those of lesser station. And if they were too ready to assume injury, being worked upon by the changing tide of affairs, my father for the same reason was perhaps over willing to manifest his indifference to their feelings.

At last Sir John Manny broke in. "Good farmers," said he, "why not the ale-house for discussions which in their scope call for a proper audience? We are but slightly interested, and can hardly hear ourselves speak."

"No offence, sirs," said Farmer Whysall, in respectful surprise, "but ale-house is no place for hearing the state of the country."

"What!" cried Sir Leonard Farnaby. "Have we here one of the county members? State of the country! I thought it was hops you were shouting about?" At which Farmer Whysall sank back in his chair and drank deeply of beer.

Father turned to the two young men towards whom he had hitherto shown a large proportion of his back. "Crops enable free-holders to pay ship money," said he.

"Or to refuse it," said Farnaby blandly. "Why, Sir John, we have lighted on two of the new kind of statesmen. May I enquire, farmers, if you are among the leaders of the Popular Party."

"I like not your badinage," said my father, who was no great hand at words.

"Tell us what profit you expect to have by rebellion to your King," continued Farnaby. "Will wheat grow heavier or your sheep fatter? Will hops increase in price?"

My father replied seriously, not to say ponderously, "I am no rebel. You may not understand it, sirs, but I have affection and loyalty for his Majesty's person, notwithstanding I dislike and will stand against his actions as opposed to the laws of England. By taxes not agreed to he sucks means for his extravagances from high and low. He is being misled along a very dangerous path by evil councillors, old fools and young fools."

"Oh, admirable, loyal farmer! Be relieved, neither I nor my friend have been sworn of His Majesty's Privy Council."

"We are all for the King but we would like to show him a better way."

"A Popular Party king, perchance," said Sir John Manny; "a king in smock and leggings?"

Then his light tone left him. "A warning word, farmer. A heavy hand awaits yokel traitors."

"Yokel traitors," spluttered my father, "I am John Neame of Splicing Oaks."

"Touch your hat to your betters, and get back to your midden," said Farnaby.

"To Mistress Neame and her rivals among the village damsels," put in Manny.

My father for a heavy man was quick on his feet, and in three seconds Manny had been lifted from his chair and was being carried like a twisting rat to the great fireplace. There my father flung him headlong, placed a massive knee on his chest and, with one hand at his throat, was using the other to rake together from the cold embers a handful of wood ashes.

Farnaby by this time was tugging furiously at my father's shoulders, and Farmer Whysall had run into the hall calling for Host Paramor. Forcing open Manny's jaws my father inserted a liberal supply of the wood ashes, and jumped to his feet, overthrowing Farnaby as he did so. As Host Paramor with serving men and two or three townsmen came rushing in, Manny was choking and coughing by the window, and Farnaby had drawn his sword, my father facing him like a bull ready to charge. Amid the confusion and shouting Farnaby was crowded away, and then above the turmoil my

father's voice was heard, " The wood ashes will clean his mouth, they're good for scouring."

A storm of angry words was lost in a swaying press of people, growing thicker every minute, and beginning to mutter feelings. The two young men were near to being hustled as they edged loose from the gathering and flung down money to pay their reckoning, not without a threat to Host Paramor. They dropped some hearty curses as they got on to their horses. Meanwhile Paramor had taken Farmer Whysall and father to his parlour, where we came upon them still hot with discussion.

Will and I were eager with a hundred glowing questions. Father and the other two flooded us with the items, and we were all so steeped in a mingled indignation and satisfaction that we gave no thought to the sequel even then in the making. Our excitement was to blame.

The upstart mood of the lesser orders demanded quick answer where answer was possible, for every day brought new evidence that the fabric of society was a-shake. Clearly was it seen that Farnaby and Manny would that evening provide the subject for jeering chatter in every ale-house of the city. Each visiting farmer would carry back to his holding the news that Yeoman Neame had rubbed a gentleman's face in the dust, and had returned home in vulgar triumph. Parliament might hear of it, even the King himself.

Father and I had to go to " The Falstaff " inn, just beyond the West Gate, our horses having been stabled there because the stalls of " The Fleur de Lis " were all full, and at " The Falstaff " we met Master Bevin and Squire Dill of Wingham, which meant a good half-an-hour's delay with them. Then, Will being in the yard

waiting with the horses, and I, thick in conversation with our two friends about the happenings of the day, father went to the door to see what the weather was like. He was hailed by name from a group of horsemen across the street near the sloping edge of the Stour, which at this point borders the city wall.

Early twilight was deepening, the figures were indistinct, and father, believing the call was from some passing friend, strode across the roadway while four or five of the men dismounted. He was in the midst of them before suspicion came upon him. Then it was too late: he had just time to cry out "Ho! Geoffrey, ho! Will," before he was wrestling and struggling with four men trying to urge him to the water's edge.

As we rushed across the street from "The Falstaff" the remainder of the party jumped from their horses to intercept us. Will, just ahead of me, pretended to run at them, dodged swiftly to the right, dived beneath an outstretched hand, and the next moment his thin strong fingers had circled the throat of one of father's assailants.

No artifice for me. I went through the men in front of me like a scythe through barley. Clark of Ford dropped with a blow which left him senseless for two hours. Richard Lovelace struck me on the forehead with his fist and I felt it not at all, though it left a bruise like a hen's egg. I doubled him up with my knee in his stomach. Sir Thomas Wilford and Sir John Tufton clung to me and I dragged them half a dozen feet, and then twisting and rolling, with some buffets on either side, I secured release, sprang up and hurled myself forward to the others at the margin of the stream.

Wilford, Lovelace and Tufton were on me almost as soon as I had reached father and Will, now hard beset.

In a flash of freedom father seized Farnaby by his hair and breeches and thrust him with a spinning shove far into the current of the Stour. I had a glimpse of one man, who afterwards proved to be Sir Richard Filmer, lying with his face to the sky, disabled or dead. For the rest it was a blind and furious battle, hard breathing mixed with the swearing.

I was on the ground throttling the life out of Tufton with Lovelace and Wilford first striking and then hauling at me when there came a piping shout from Will Dyson and I jerked myself to my haunches.

I had no time to rise before the drama was completed. Manny had been stricken down by a terrible blow from my father, and there was now but a stranger unencumbered. He had whipped out his sword (which had led to Will's cry) and I read death for my father in his poise, and in that same second by the light of lanterns of townsmen hurrying up I recognised the man. It was Jasper Herrill, Jasper Herrill of the King's School, the enemy of my youth. Cold horror was in my heart. His right foot glided forward, and Will Dyson, in the impulse to protect my father by whose side he stood, moved swiftly frontwards. He may have had no thought for sacrifice, but sacrifice he made. The blade intended for father went clean through him beneath the shoulder and showed three inches at the back.

Will was coughing and breaking at the knees, Herrill was tugging at his sword which may have struck a bone, and father had made two quick steps towards the assassin, with, I am quite certain, the purpose of taking a life for a life, when there came a flash and a report from six feet away, and father in his turn tottered and then dropped. Cynthia Wilford, the seventeen years old daughter of Sir Thomas Wilford, had run up, pistol in her hand, and

from behind Herrill had sent a bullet through my father.

I rose unsteadily. The townspeople were in among us now, primed for help on our behalf, alas, too late. I was conscious that injured men were being lifted, that the Cavaliers were trying to get away from the hostile crowd. But my thought was on the girl and like a mad animal I tore through the people, pursued her as she fled screaming, and when I caught the little murderess, I lifted her as a terrier lifts a rat and flung her with all my force towards the fruit shop lit by candles at the corner. With a cry of agony she fell amid the baskets of apples and pears. Dazed I went back through the crowd, which made way for me in silence. I sank by the side of that great lovable father of mine whose voice would no more ring out for Jim, the sheep-dog, would no more call loudly for beer for himself and Parson Blechynden on jovial Saturday nights.

CHAPTER THREE

JASPER HERRILL PAYS US A VISIT

IN the heavy days while I was trying to recognise life on the farm without my father, who now lay in Eastry churchyard, my mother and Joan each had a task which, by its very anxiety and continuous effort, brought them some assuagement though they knew it not. They were striving to keep with us Will Dyson, who, untouched in any vital place, yet sorely wounded, lay in our second-best bedroom, tended like one of the family. Grief yields in some degree to the poignancy of suspense and great exertion, and my mother and Joan were giving themselves to an almost passionate care by day and by night.

I could not adjust myself, and did not wish to, and so, because I rose early in the morning and set the men to work as usual, and because I listened with blank face to kindly neighbours, there were some who called me a cold and hard young man, and others who asked if I could be the son of my father. Would John Neame have been stunned to inaction, to acquiescence?

I was young and selfish, overladen with sorrow, and little I cared what people thought of my manners with father in the grave, and Will Dyson like enough to go the same way. If I was outwardly dull, there was temper enough within me. Ned Tulks, who never could hold his tongue when gossip was abroad, told me the village chatter about myself one morning. I walked

over to the cow-shed and got a stout ash stick we used for the correction of the young bull.

"If that hay you are trussing isn't finished by dinner time, I'll tan your hide so you can't sit, Ned Tulks."

I placed the stick against the fence and went on at my work with a wimbol twisting bonds from a heap of straw. Ned Tulks surveyed me in heavy surprise, with a suspicion that trouble had gone to my brain. Nevertheless, by the means of additional sweat he finished trussing the hay before dinner time.

Among those who came to see me was Sir John Culpepper, one of the two members of Parliament for the county and I touched my hat to him because he had once asked father to stay to dinner in the big house at Hollingbourne. He loved the soil from which he sprang, notwithstanding that he stood high among the great men in London. My father had always said there was hope for Charles so long as he kept by his side this Kentish squire, who, with all loyalty, withstood his master's indiscretions, voted against him in the House of Commons and yet, by manly friendship, held his influence with both King and Queen.

I remember as he rode up to the midden where I was at work, his beautiful black mare and her bridle bright with silver and his cloak lined with red silk. He held himself upright, a middle-sized man with eyes set wide apart. His voice was rough. The actual kindly words he used about my father have gone from me, but I recall very clearly the tone of friendship behind a haughty presence. When he had heard the story over again from me he said, "A tragedy for you, Neame, and one of many sad signs for all honest people. These men were not punished?"

"Only as we punished them."

"I have their names. I doubt if anything can be done. Our old English justice is mortgaged for a time. You haven't seen the little hell-cat who fired the shot?"

I shook my head.

"A stout man, Wilford. Why was he in it, I wonder?"

He turned his horse.

"Trouble is ahead for all of us, Neame, but if I have the power to be of service send me word. Give my respects to Mistress Neame and your sister." He beckoned me to him and I went within a foot of his saddle girths.

"Buy what powder you can and store it. There's to be a shortage. Keep to your farm, and you had better hide the powder when you get it."

He touched the mare with his spurs, and was gone without looking round.

It was during Will Dyson's convalescence that I came out from moodiness and began to feel a pulse in life again. There had been critical hours for Will, but thanks to mother and Joan and a tough constitution he had slowly emerged to safety. He picked up strength apace. Within a month he was drinking mutton broth from the basin because the spoon was so slow.

By now we could discuss the happenings at Canterbury with some calmness and we split up the blame. In the hearing of the women we said little about any effort towards reprisals which some time might be our ambition. Once my mother reflected as to the contrition of those who had attacked us, at which Will grinned, muttered a malediction on the souls of all of them. He spoke of Manny, still on his back as the result of my father's last blow.

" It was like the master leaving something in his will, something to remember him by," said Will.

Will was sitting on a stool in the bedroom fretting for movement but too weak to be allowed downstairs, when mother and Joan first came by the knowledge that a good man in a fight is not necessarily a saint—and Will, be it remembered, had become to them a symbol of all that was noble and self-sacrificing. Their disgust brought me my first chuckle since father's death.

It was three days after Will was out of bed that buxom Dorothy Farthing, daughter of old Daniel Farthing the miller at Ash, knocked at the kitchen and asked as to how Will was getting on, and told my mother she had brought him a jar of quince jelly. " I'll give it to Will," said my mother.

" Mayn't I see him myself? "

Forwardness this, and impudence too, from the miller's daughter to Mistress Neame, as my mother was quick to show the girl.

Whereupon Dorothy stammered out that she had been secretly betrothed to Will for two years past.

Startled mother sought me in the wood-house for counsel, and I went up straightway to Will. I have never seen that resourceful person so taken aback.

" I told master we ought to have changed our miller," he said feebly. He crawled towards the bed and got into it, clothes and all. " I'm too bad to see her, Master Geoffrey."

The next revelation was when I went to pay what we owed Jenkins, the carpenter, of Eastry village. His daughter, Jennie, a lively slip of a young woman, was thick with questions about Will Dyson. " Can't I come over to Splicing Oaks and see him? We are going to be wed."

I went home and said some stern words to Will. "So this is why you wanted to escape from poor Dorothy Farthing; you'd better confess to Jennie when she comes to see you to-morrow afternoon."

"To-morrow afternoon," echoed Will weakly. "I can't see her, I'm terrible bad, Master Geoffrey."

"What!"

"It was wanting them harrows done quickly. She's a bold young woman."

When at the end of the week Martha Flatbush arrived from Dunkell's farm with a pot of honey and the usual timorous enquiries and request, I began to realise that Will's full recovery would not be without its drawbacks for him. By this time he was down in the kitchen, and he sat concealed in the chimney corner among the sides of bacon while I somehow got rid of the lovesick Martha without asking her in.

"What have you to say?" I demanded when she had gone.

"It was the master's good heart in lending them a team to plough their nine-acre," he almost whined.

"Have you any other betrothals?" I shouted at him.

"Don't know, Master Geoffrey, whether I have or not."

"Don't know?"

"Women get such notions."

I stared at him.

"I did have a litttle talk with Mistress Bonny, who keeps 'The Bull.'"

"You villain—you——"

Will sighed, and went and looked out of the window.

When Will a week later made his first long excursion out of doors and walked over to "The Bull" at Eastry,

I was in doubt whether he meant to clinch the connection with Mistress Bonny, who was a plump young widow, or to clear himself of the last of his entanglements. Perhaps he did not know himself. He came back at the end of three hours while I was busy with Jeremy Eason trimming the edges of a garden we were making for Joan's flowers in the coming spring and summer. Avoiding the front way Will came straight to the garden and, as Jeremy was bending at his work, gave a significant jerk of the head, and walked towards the brew-house, whence I followed him. I guessed there was something more than sweethearting afoot. When we were in the brew-house with the door shut he fired his news at me like a shot from a gun.

" Jasper Herrill is at Eastry."

I was not so moved as Will expected.

" What do you fear? "

" You're the one to answer that, Master Geoffrey."

Thereupon Will gave me his narrative. Mistress Bonny, regardful of the compliments of one who had become the hero of ale-house talk, made a to-do of her visitor and he was compelled to stay for dinner (pigs' feet jellied and plum-pudding to follow). She lavished an admiration in which it was easy to believe Will had allowed himself a not altogether passive enjoyment. Talk of King and Parliament and promised trouble led Mistress Bonny to the assertion that it was an ill wind which blew no one any good. Never had " The Bull " known such times. Eastry was at the breaking of the roads for Sandwich, Deal and Dover, and " The Bull," never lacking good provender for man or beast, was not only a convenient halting place but often enough a rendezvous. Every other day there was coming and going of horsemen, plain men in leather jerkins from

London or beyond, gentlemen like Sir Edward Dering hastening to Dover, and, only the day before, a coach with four horses travelling to Canterbury bearing thither an old lady with a girl, discovered during their delay for dinner to be Lady Wootton and her daughter. I gathered that under this talk from Mistress Bonny, Will's matrimonial intentions steadily mounted.

" We have a fine gentleman here now," she said. " He came two hours ago: he is to rest the night. A soft-spoken gallant with lace to his sleeves. He meets friends here in the morning. There he is now, crossing the yard."

With lazy curiosity Will twisted round and opened the lattice window at his elbow. The visitor turned at the sound, and for a second Jasper Herrill and Will gazed at each other face to face. Two minutes later Will had left " The Bull " and was speeding on his way back to Splicing Oaks.

" He's a bird of passage, an adventurer, and troublous premonitions take him to and fro," said I. " Eastry was an accident."

" Eastry an accident with Splicing Oaks three miles away? "

" What's this neighbourhood to him? "

" He meets a party. Keep the men round the house to-morrow, Master Geoffrey."

" We could go over to Eastry and shoot him from behind a hedge. Is that what you want? "

" It would save a lot of trouble."

I set Will to go to the pasture by Poison Cross with the excuse that the ewes were not properly sheltered, because I wished him out of the opportunity for talk with mother and Joan who would, I thought, be near distracted with his news. It was a long walk for a man

not yet fully recovered of his strength and I reckoned he would be ready for bed when he returned. The winter dusk was nearly at hand, and having watched Will down the lane I turned indoors and fetched out Joan to see her new garden.

Joan had not been content with the harebells and the primroses in the woods, but must needs follow the style of Squire Boteler at Heronden in having a piece of ground where she could sow seeds and watch them grow. Winter was the time to break the soil and I had made Jeremy Eason dig up fifteen rods of grass, pick off the roots, powder the clods, rake smooth the surface and put two cross-wise paths from corner to corner. The progress of the work had helped to bring back some of Joan's vivacity. She was all delight at the completion of the garden and she came lightly beside me through the corner of the orchard, colour in her oyster-shell cheeks, her great blue eyes full of eagerness, and her hair, rather short, but fine and wavy, bursting like new gold from beneath her hood. Joan was excellent as a cook and merry as a companion, and a brother might be forgiven for not thinking much about her looks. Yet, in fact, Joan, so good a housewife (and splendid with weaning calves), was as pretty a girl as ever I knew in East Kent. She clapped her hands as she saw the outcome of Jeremy's labour, and especially at his shrewdness in using a line of young apricots on the eastern side for shelter. She seized a stick and drew some lines in the moist earth for daffodils, and she was up to her ankles in the mould and I was feeling very pleased at her excitement when I heard the sound of a horseman approaching in the lane towards the house. Through the apple trees and above the hawthorn hedge beyond we could get an outline of the rider, and we saw he was a stranger.

Joan came with me as I walked across the grass among the trees to the gate which opened on the lane, in order to meet the newcomer and to learn his mission. A plumed hat put his face in shadow, but his figure seemed familiar. Joan whispered, "What a fine-looking gentleman!" and recognition rushed upon me. With an audacity which was beyond understanding, regardless of decency, Jasper Herrill had come to us at Splicing Oaks. I felt myself grow older at the sight of him. The assurance of the man gave me a chill at the heart.

I stepped in front of Joan towards the gate, over which his horse was thrusting its head.

"Well?"

He lifted his hat in token of Joan's presence, "Master Neame, you know me. I am Jasper Herrill, called this few years past Captain Herrill, by virtue of a soldier's service."

I answered not, but stood rigid, looking at him full in the face and waiting for further words.

"In view of the wrong you have suffered no man in my position would have come here to your home without compulsion." He spoke slowly; his bearing had dignity.

"I hear you," I said.

He swung himself from his horse, and, bridle reins in hand, stood not four feet from me with the gate between.

"I ask your patience and if this is Mistress Neame your sister, I am glad she is here."

There was deference in his tone.

"No man could have a harder task than I in visiting the homestead of John Neame. I doubt if you can bring yourself to believe that what befell him was a calamity to me and others. It was unforeseen. I was partly to

blame, I ought never to have joined the accursed party. They meant no serious harm when they started out; you must know that already. You are a reasonable man."

"You have called to make excuses—it is time lost."

He stiffened.

"You know quite well that right or wrong I would not trouble to come here to defend myself. I am telling the facts for another purpose. One of our group, believing that I was in peril of death, was moved to frenzy and fired a pistol at your father. She has been in agony about it since."

"Yes, I hurt her considerably."

"If it gives you satisfaction, Master Neame, you broke a young girl's arm and put her shoulder out of joint. I speak of her remorse."

"I have heard of lawyers. Why do you waste yourself at soldiering?"

His eyes grew hard and he turned, put his foot in the stirrup and mounted. "What I have come to say is this; it was my action which led to John Neame's death. Your account is with me and no one else. That Mistress Wilford fired the shot was an impulse—little more than an accident."

"I will weigh the argument."

"It is well that without ill-feeling I should warn you. I have given you reasons for Mistress Wilford's action. If you so much as lift a finger against the girl who thought of nothing but to save one who was dear to her——"

"Then I suppose Splicing Oaks will lose son as well as father. Hear me, sirrah, we have had enough of this nonsense. Show your face on this farm again and I will turn Will Dyson on to you with our largest pitchfork. It's seven feet long with sharp steel tines and can loose a

soul more easily than your cowardly sword. Get off my land."

He smiled—the knave actually smiled. "You remind me," he said. From a pouch which hung at his side he drew two golden guineas and tossed them in my direction. "I regret the accident to your man."

He turned to Joan and all hardness dropped away from him. "Mistress Neame, I fear I have given you pain. In my clumsy way I have tried to avoid it. Endeavour to believe I wish no harm to you and yours. If I were your brother I should likely enough feel as he does."

And Joan—my sister Joan, dropped him a pretty curtsey with an answering light in her eyes.

On the way back to the house I spluttered out my horror, and to my surprise Joan turned on me with spirit. "Bad he may be; he cannot be wholly bad. I know all that he has done, but surely there was something fine in coming here to-day to save his sweetheart."

"He killed father."

"He did not kill father; it was that girl. He stands by her; he came here to save her."

After supper I sought a word with Will Dyson back from his journey to Poison Cross. When I told him of the two guineas lying on the grass near the gate in the lane he was pleased.

"You'll take the money?" I cried.

"I'll be out for it at dawn. I'm almost in mind to go for it now with a lantern. Two guineas is two guineas."

I surveyed him gloomily.

"He seems to have been soft enough," said Will.

"Too soft." I told him about Joan.

Will whistled softly to himself.

"Joan is my pretty sister; I fancy he makes a habit of pretty sisters."

"I still believe a gun from behind a hedge is the best way," said Will.

I thought for a moment and then I said, "We'll go over to Eastry village to-morrow morning after breakfast. Saddle the roan for me, you can take Polly."

CHAPTER FOUR

I MEET CYNTHIA WILFORD

"WHAT'S our purpose, master?" asked Will Dyson next morning as we left Splicing Oaks.

"To find out what this interloper is doing here."

"You weren't so anxious yesterday."

"That was before his insolence in coming to the farm. I've thought over it."

"You'll ask him, I reckon? What'll you do after he's told you?"

"Hold your stupid tongue. I'll baulk his errand whatever it is."

"Oh, aye!" said Will.

I knew as well as did Will that our ride was little more than the outcome of roughened temper, and that some spying on our enemies was as much as I could hope for. Was I to make an interference with Herrill and his friends if I should see them? Yet my evil mood was not abated even while I called myself a fool. I strained to thrust myself at the interloper, was all on edge to let him know that Eastry was a dangerous neighbourhood.

Our juncture with the main road to Eastry was at Poison Cross, and I cast my eye across intervening fields towards the village searching for a group of Cavaliers. I wondered if those whom Herrill was to meet included any who were in the fight at Canterbury.

Past Poison Cross and in the straight for Eastry we went by some farm carts, and Dame Burden with a load

of rush baskets on her donkey. 'Twas thus perhaps we had not heard, or if we heard had heeded not, two riders coming at a trot behind us from the direction of Woodnesborough. We pulled in at a walking pace by the side of the road, and when the couple were abreast I took a careless look round at them, and my heart gave a jump, and I had the feeling of a horrid dream. Was it for this that I had ridden forth?

Cynthia Wilford was only seventeen, and something of a child lay behind her flashing womanhood. As she rode she was talking to her father in lively fashion, and Sir Thomas, a heavy man, was listening impassively, his short beard cocked forward. I realised what I had heard of him—how he had told the king to his face he was a fool. It was at Newcastle where, disgusted with the ragamuffin army to fight the Scots, Wilford said to Charles, " I have burnt the royal colours. They cost you nothing. I paid for them myself."

Listening to his daughter Wilford was already regarding me when I turned my face towards him, and he instantly reined in his horse.

" Master Geoffrey Neame? "

" That is my name."

" I am Sir Thomas Wilford. I looked to meet you."

" The last time you sought a Neame——"

He held up his hand.

" Hear me first. To ask pardon of a wronged person is nothing to be ashamed of but in this case it would be trumpery. I cannot bring a dead man to life. I have a right to tell you facts. On that day in Canterbury my daughter, Captain Herrill and I had our horses ready for journeying to Dover and we were in the yard at ' The Fountain ' when Farnaby and his friends came up. The account of what happened at ' The Fleur de Lis ' was

coloured. I had the impression that your father, without any provocation, had been violent to Farnaby and Manny. I saw no harm in ducking an insulting farmer, thought indeed that he was lucky to escape so lightly. I was persuaded to join the party, not so much to lend a hand but rather as one goes to see a cockfight. Your headlong work brought me into the struggle. When blows are going it is no time to weigh rights and wrongs."

He stopped at this as though waiting for a word from me, and I made reply coldly.

"I surmised something of the sort, but it lightens neither the guilt of those who killed my father, nor the loss of those who suffered it. Murder is murder."

"'Twas not murder," said Sir Thomas quickly. "My daughter fired that pistol to prevent your father from killing Captain Herrill. She thought to stop him, disable him, nothing more."

"A bullet through the heart!"

"The chances of a fight fall on the just as well as the unjust, as you will know, young man, when you are older. For myself I may say that had I known then what I have learnt since about your father, I should have been on his side and not with those who caused his death."

"Cold comfort and belated."

I faced him with eyes as bold as his own.

"I would probably have said as much. I have no reply but this, that any reparation, consonant with reason, I will make to you for the share of myself and my daughter."

"There is no reparation you can make. You have done as much as may be with your words. What remains is that my father lost his life at your daughter's hands, and that she was there as your companion."

" You are old and hard beyond your years, Master Neame."

" Hard! " I cried bitterly. " We are just farm folk, working each week-day, going to Church on Sundays and always respecting our betters. Gentlemen with fine silk clothes and swords, who have never worked hard in their lives, descended to taunt and bully my father because, God help us, he was so far beneath them that he laboured on his ground instead of drawing rents from a life of idleness and soldiering and worse. When he resented it, like the man he was, you and yours, the gentlefolk of England, plotted to sport with him as you would bait a bull and then you killed him. Hard! "

" There is good cause for your feeling," said Wilford quietly, " but you must remember conduct you have described is not usually found. You have enlarged it. It was bad enough but recall all that is around us, the disturbances we are in, the intemperateness on all sides. My reparation was meant in no material way. For what it was worth I willed to offer you now and in the future my friendship, to try as far as I might to make amends. Here is no cause for offence."

" I would be a churl not to thank you. All the same there is nothing you could do which would be acceptable. To take your friendship would keep me awake of nights."

A forbearing smile came to Wilford. " The arrogance of gentle folk! Are any more proud than the Neames? "

He looked at me from beneath lowered eyelids, and then was turning to the girl, perhaps with the word to go, when I broke in with " The threat of Herrill yesterday was unnecessary. I think you should know that."

" Threat? "

"He came to Splicing Oaks with menaces in case I should endanger your daughter."

"I have never thought you would in cold blood do any harm to my daughter."

"It was the point of Herrill's visit."

Sir Thomas shook his head.

"Then why did the man come to Splicing Oaks?"

Cynthia Wilford lifted her gaze from the withers of her horse. "Let me speak," she said.

I had my first look at her in calmness. She was quite unlike Sir Thomas, being slim, with black hair and eyes from which she could not shut the feelings; her face was long rather than round and she had a rich dark skin which suggested foreign blood. For prettiness she could not nearly match our Joan, but there shone from her both eagerness and grace. Her voice was deep-toned for a young girl.

"We should have been here before had I been well enough," and as she spoke I noticed that her left arm was kept stiffly to her side, and remembered what I had heard of her injuries.

"I have been out of my room but two days. Captain Herrill is at Eastry on my pressure, but I did not know he intended to see you alone. We were to meet here this morning. I had no fear of what you would do to me."

"She was ardent to come," interjected Wilford. "I tried to persuade her there was no need."

"I was not afraid of what you would do," went on Cynthia Wilford, "I have lived a nightmare. I saw in your father's face that he would have killed Captain Herrill. I have never in my life before fired a pistol. I have never hurt anyone. I was full of fright and horror. I fired the pistol without understanding it would kill him.

It is the truth. I was a crazy girl to go with the party. We carried pistols because we were travelling."

"That's enough," said Wilford, putting out his hand to her.

"No, no, there's more," she cried, looking at me all the while; "the sight of your father falling down in a heap never left me. I had dreams, most awful dreams. I tried to excuse myself. They told me it would do no good to seek you out, because I could do nothing, and only trouble would follow. But every day and night has been a horror to me and I wanted to stop my bad dreams by meeting you and saying 'Here is Cynthia Wilford, who killed your father.'"

She reared her little body erect, head thrown back, deep breaths shaking her.

I gazed at her in a silly stupefied way, looking the great gawk that I was. My wits were blown hither and thither by the picture of her, by her vehemence.

Sir Thomas edged his horse to hers, whispered something and then came the sound of a cantering horse, and round the twist of the road from Eastry was Herrill riding towards us. He raised his hand in salutation to Sir Thomas, and without a glance at me and without a check went straight to Cynthia Wilford. Their stirrups touched as he reached forward, his hand lay gently on her shoulder, and though her head was from me I suspected she was sobbing. Herrill turned swiftly, "Has someone hurt her?"

His eyes went through me like a thrust of his sword. "Have you hurt her, Neame?"

"He has not hurt me. I wish he had," said the girl.

"Don't be a fool," said Herrill. "If he raises a hand——"

I had got a hold of myself now, and I interrupted him with a laugh, a long and coarse guffaw.

"Come, Will," said I, and set the roan for Eastry.

We circled home through the village without stopping, and as we left the houses behind us Will said:

"She'll give him trouble, that young woman."

"Pooh!" I struck the roan to a quicker gait which stopped further talk till we slackened down within sight of home.

"Very brave," said Will. "She doesn't care whether she's hurt or not, but takes care to come with two men with swords. Very brave!"

What demon was in me I know not, but I swerved my horse into the side of Polly, put an arm round Will, lifted him, shook him free and deposited him among the stinging nettles which lined the bank and ditch on the right. "Let that stop your hog's mouth," I shouted. Will rolled over unhurt, except for nettle stings, but very surprised. By the time he had righted himself and pulled his smock down I had jumped to the ground. "What is that?" I demanded, pointing to a pistol in his belt.

"It's loaded and all ready," said the unabashed Will. "Our side was going to shoot first this time."

"You fool!"

"I don't mind being a fool so long as I can keep alive. I would hate to lose my life through being wise."

I left Will to unsaddle the horses and walked slowly across to the path through the wood and leant my arms on the top of the gate. Trees and grass and all growing things have always been more to me than friends in time of disturbance, putting a point to happiness and smoothing away the worst of any trouble. They have a quiet monotone, very understanding, and the message goes right to the fibre of any countryman with some direct in-

fluence more potent than anything to be conveyed by the clumsy words of men and women. Something new had come to me that day, giving me a pleasant sense of fulfilment, elusive but very real. That I had borne myself with the Wilfords befittingly was a satisfaction, no less the daughter's remorse, the father's soldierly regret. Moreover, I had scorned Herrill. Yet all these things together could not have produced that curiously persistent song within my heart. It might have been the sense of early spring in the midst of a warm winter germinating its customary thrill, only never before had it come with such strength or quickness. The January bareness of the trees had no loneliness as on the day before, or I had not recognised then the companionable murmur of limbs and twigs in the south-west breeze, nor the whisper of the lower growth, the alder and the hazel. Why a stretch of yellow winter aconite with starlings round it a hundred yards off amid the trees made the world seem strangely happy to me I cannot tell.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TWO PURITANS

THE two men who rode up the lane on February 7th wore high-crowned hats without plumes, and had none of the elegancies of gentlefolk. One was thin-shouldered with dull eyes, and his companion was broad of face and body, a giant of a man. The pair of them dismounted in front of the house, and I walked over from the cow-shed where I had been giving the calves their mid-morning meal.

"We seek Master Geoffrey Neame," said the thin man, and I was surprised at the explosive manner of one who looked so contemptible.

"I am Geoffrey Neame."

"We give you greeting, Master Neame. My name is Despard, Richard Despard, lately of Maidstone, and now at Canterbury, and this is Master Thomas Hickin, of Dover."

"The maltster?"

"Yes. I have more than once bought barley from your father," said the big man.

While I took them into the parlour memory served me about the man Despard, a virulent Independent whose preaching had brought trouble to him at Maidstone in the past two years.

"Our first word is that of grief and pride," said Hickin, "your father died a martyr's death. We share the sorrow of this house. We glory in the honour that has come to it. As for those who caused the tragedy ——"

" The children of Belial they shall be pursued with the sword," exclaimed Despard.

I went to fetch my mother and Joan, for though I cared not for the narrow fervour of these visitors yet they had come to give a homage. With the women present Hickin and Despard paid much tribute to my father, too much for truth because John Neame had no thought or desire for martyrdom, was certainly no saint, only a strong-tempered man, always ready to return blow for blow. But my mother was pleased though a little saddened, and she went out and brought from the kitchen the gallon water pitcher filled with beer, and a supply of bread and cheese.

After Hickin and Despard had refreshed themselves they drew an outline of occurrences in the country, and told how Parliament was now, in effect, governing in the place of the King, and how Mr. Pym had a God-given strength. Charles was becoming reckless, they said. Mr. Pym was sending friends to many places in the country to collect promises for aid.

" We may in truth be called the representatives of the Parliament for east Kent," said Hickin, " and you will be happy to know you are among the first on our list of qualifiable helpers."

" Be pleased to make your errand quite clear," I said.

" To whom should we go but to a sufferer, a valiant man, and one of substance," said Despard. " Some though inclined to us are faint-hearted. Others are hard-pressed for the means. 'Twas but yesterday we heard that Geoffrey Neame, strong of heart as of hand, would welcome us and uphold the cause of righteousness."

" What friend conveyed this good news? "

" From London came the message, London, where in godly circles, though you may know it not, the name of Neame already sounds a trumpet note."

" I have taken no part in these troubles and except for my father's death should not have borne enmity to any man."

" It was the Lord's way to open eyes which were blind," said Despard.

" You are asking me to join in a rebellion against the King? "

" His days be few," said Hickin.

" Satan stands at his right hand," exclaimed Despard. " He is doomed."

" The King doomed! " exclaimed mother.

" It is cause for rejoicing," said Despard. " But for Charles and his evilness your husband would now be alive."

" Still he is the King," said Joan.

Despard regarded her gravely.

" The Lord shall reward the doer of evil according to his wickedness. But Geoffrey Neame needs no reminding of these things."

" Are you here to make a demand? " I asked.

" Only the demand which conscience must soon place before every Englishman who loves his country," said Hickin. " We have talked this over having regard to your means. We ask to be assured of the sum of fifty pounds, and the use of three men with horses, saddles and pistols when the call shall come."

" It is a joyous privilege," said Despard. " Bring thy gift to the tabernacle."

" We are prosperous, but fifty pounds is a large sum, and as for men I cannot take others to jeopardy without their willing assent."

For a second or so the two looked at me in silence and then Hickin said, "It cannot be that we have another weakling in Geoffrey Neame."

"You are wicked men," exclaimed Joan.

"My son is not going to fight any more," said mother.

Despard put on an air of judgment which was not to my liking.

"Hear me, sirs," I said. "I am a loyal Englishman. I hate the King's tyranny, but I'll take no oppression from others in exchange. I like not this demand."

"Think well before you refuse, Master Neame," and there was something minatory in Hickin's words.

"Splicing Oaks is no breeding ground for politics," I replied coldly. "I mean no disrespect, and it may be I lack courage, but I mislike to take the lead in this affair. Where are the gentry? You have many on your side?"

"Before we came we heard rumours which we put aside," said Despard. "Splicing Oaks paid ship money when others refused tithe for the harlot, Henriette Marie."

"That is no language for a minister," I said sternly.

He made an impatient gesture, and went on with gathering force.

"We heard that those at Splicing Oaks, master and men, had part in May Day frolics, made Christmastide a time of idolatrous revelry, endorsed the devilish Book of Sports, encouraged games on Sunday."

"What of it?"

"Are these things to be capped by a denial of godly reparation. Your father's death opened a fresh chapter. Are you to be the backslider?"

"What then?" I persisted. "The King is on his throne despite you."

"There is no King except in name, young man."

I felt my patience breaking.

"Come, sirs, this is just secret plotting in advance. The King——"

"You question our power?" said Hickin. "Here is your answer. John Marsden, rector of St. Mary at Canterbury, for speaking against the Parliament, has been deprived of all his dignities and preferments. Sir Roger Twisden is watched, likely to be seized any day. Strafford, Charles' favourite tyrant, has been executed. We are adjudging what fine shall be recommended against John Turner of Wingham for refusing to fulfil the request of Parliament for aid. You say the King is still the King!"

"Give them what they want, Geoffrey," said my mother.

"I have balanced your proposal carefully, Master Hickin and Master Despard," I said slowly, and as I spoke I felt their harsh demeanour change. Submission was to be met graciously.

"I can give you my answer without further ado. The two of you may go to the devil."

There was no outburst, only a change of countenance, then some whispering together. Hickin it was who spoke.

"We have our duty to do now. With your refusal we report your position. It is easy to know the number of your acres and the number of your horses."

"You are not going to take Splicing Oaks away from us?" said Joan.

"We take what our cause requires," said Hickin. "Our demands must needs be accentuated against those who, unwilling to lend a hand to righteousness, may the

more readily contribute of their plenty to the cause of Satan."

"Enough," I shouted. I had loosened the rein now. Master Hickin and Master Despard never knew how near they were to being taken out one by one and tossed into the freshet.

They were saved by an interruption, a clatter outside, a horse charging up to the front door. We all turned to the window and had a glimpse of a high-booted rider with silk sash flinging himself from the saddle. The thundering of his fist on the door, left no doubt of urgency.

The two Puritans were on their feet as I walked towards the entrance. I had a half suspicion that the newcomer was an addition to their force, and it was in no welcoming spirit that I unfastened the latch. In my surprise I took a step back—wordless. The man who stood before me was Jasper Herrill.

"Neame, I am here in friendliness. I know the men within and their mission. Let me get to them. I can help you."

I was overborne by his impetuosity; while I was muttering an enquiry he had pushed by me and, hat in hand, was in the parlour. He made an obeisance to my mother and Joan, and swung towards the visitors.

"What do you here, sirs? By what right do you thus intrude on a peaceful and loyal home?"

"Who are you to ask the question?" demanded Hickin.

"He is one of the sons of Belial," I remarked.

"We are here by authority and no more need be known to you whoever you may be," said Hickin.

"Away with windy words, Master Hickin. You are here to enforce future service, to get promises of money."

" They are here to take our farm," said Joan.

Herrill kept his eyes on Hickin, whom I guessed he knew by hearsay.

" You are over-running your power. There is still law in the land. Besides, I know Master Neame and his friends, and I can make you an assurance you will find easier prey elsewhere."

" You threaten us? "

" Certainly I do. But before you are stirred to godly vengeance I tell you in seriousness you are making an error. And you are in peril."

Despard cackled scornfully. " With half the militia in Canterbury——"

Herrill stopped him with uplifted hand.

" Your orders, vague enough, I'll be bound are at least four days old."

" We are not here to shuffle argument with enemies," said Hickin.

" Four days old," repeated Herrill.

He thrust his hand into his breast, drew out a paper, and tossed it to Hickin. The two Puritans took the document to the window and studied it together. It took them a full minute to digest what was in it.

" Well! " said Herrill at last.

Hickin looked up.

" This conflicts with our orders."

" Is that all you have to say, sirrah? "

Hickin folded the paper and returned it. " We have been misled," he said surlily.

" If we take it as true? " said Despard.

Hickin turned on him fiercely. " Addle-pate, make not the mischief worse."

He strode to the door; the other followed reluctantly enough. Through the window we saw them ride away.

Herrill did not turn round to us till they had disappeared at the end of the lane. Then he said:

"I make apology for so abrupt an entry, but it was only this morning I had the means to deal with these fools. I came in haste. I wanted to kill their errand before they left with trouble a-doing."

"We thank you, sir," said my mother.

"Indeed we do," said Joan.

"I am not indifferent to your service, Master Herrill, said I. "Will you take it amiss if I ask how you, a King's man, came to know of this excursion, and how you were enabled to stamp out the business with such timely speed?"

"It were well, Master Neame, not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Take a small deliverance from one you count an enemy and pass to the task of to-morrow."

"That explains not why you came to Splicing Oaks to-day."

"I wonder if you will believe the simple truth. It was not for your sake, Master Neame. You have never pursued a winning way with me."

I looked at him, thick with suspicion.

"Learn further, that this man, whom you hate so much for past offences, is concerned to see no harm befall Mistress Neame and your sister. There may come a time when you will be able to believe that no hurt can come to these women folk of yours while I can raise a hand. Strange, is it not?"

"What talk is this? Let me warn you, I'll have no one playing tricks——"

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey, please don't," cried Joan, but I was not to be stopped.

"I want you to know, fine gentleman as you are, that

my sister is no rabbit to be trapped. Do not attempt it."

Gone was Herrill's air of whimsicality; his face was paler than I had ever seen it, and had I not known the man so well, I should have supposed he had a touch of fear. My mother had dropped to a stool with her face in her hands. Joan, flushed but quite herself, was a little on one side, half-way between us.

"It is well you should have spoken clearly," said Herrill, "I am glad your sister should hear what you have to say and what I have to reply. Will you take this assertion to heart, that it is impossible for me to set out on any course which might cause your sister injury or sorrow."

He stopped. It was the only time in the course of my repeated contacts with this man that I knew him hesitate for words. He was looking at me and not at Joan.

"Your sister is safe with me. You will some day have the answer to the riddle, Master Neame. My service, ladies."

He made for the door, and then Joan, her face aflame, avid for some friendly parting, burst out a question.

"Tell us of your magic document, Master Herrill. Are you a wizard? What is the secret?"

Herrill took the folded paper from his doublet and waved it gently to and fro.

"I hold the King's commission," he said. "The King's writ still runs."

CHAPTER SIX

THE INVITATION

I went out to the big barn where there were oats waiting to be threshed. Labour with the flail takes dross from the spirit and clarifies the judgment. I know no exercise which will more surely dispel perplexity.

I propped open the doors giving on to the boarded threshing floor, on each side of which was reared the builded corn like indoor ricks. From its peg on the cross beam I took down our best flail (polished holly stakes hinged with leather and whip-cord) and swung it round my head a time or two to get the balance—and then to work! Slowly at first and with quickening strokes, regularly spaced, I dislodged a moiety of the grain, bringing nearer steadily the half-threshed corn for its second blow together with a little of that hitherto untouched for its initial buffeting. Every minute or so when the straw was bunched I thinned it out with a quick twist and thrust of the loose end of my flail, pointed for the purpose. A soothing rhythm had this work of the flail, with the whisper of the straw behind it, and the occasional " tat tat " as I made free the tangles on the floor. Around me was the sweet pungency of bruised straw, releasing summer on a wintry day.

If illumination presently came to me (with the first sign of moisture on my forehead) it was not by any revealment of what lay behind the portents and excitements of the morning, but by an instinct which enforced upon me, seductively enough, the fancies of a young man

about a girl. I was impatient at my own indulgence. The vapours were not for one who was threshing oats, I told myself. I strove to face the practical things, the conflict of Puritan and Cavalier, the results to us of Herrill's craft and boldness, the fate of Splicing Oaks—but without success, for intruding on my vision was Cynthia Wilford, with her straight-looking eyes and dark complexion.

I was wrestling with the reason why this dainty youthful creature should be affianced to a man of forty, and then was luxuriating in her wistfulness, the deep notes in her voice, her soft slim lines and the way her eyes lighted up. To me those externals were in truth but symbols. How vain are words for my purpose! Perhaps Heaven on occasions gives us wisdom beyond our own devising, for all unknowingly I had drifted that morning to the guiding influence in the welter that lay ahead.

From misty imaginings I was brought to reality by the entry of Joan to the barn with a quart of ale, fresh drawn and foaming. Among the satisfactions of life I put three highest, a quart of ale brought to a thirsty man among the stubble or in the barn, the sight of a waving field of wheat fit for the faghook, and the look from the eyes of a woman in love. They may vary in degree these satisfactions, but each on its special occasion is wholly to the heart. Thoughts of Cynthia Wilford went from me when Joan came in with that earthen quart pot with its creaming surface. I gave my sister all the thanks she sought when I drained it to the last particle of froth.

"I came to bring you more than the beer," said Joan, and she passed to me a folded paper.

"This was given to Thompson by Master Herrill as he mounted his horse with word that it was to be handed

to you when mother and I were not present. Thompson couldn't see you around so he brought it to me."

"For brains I'd change Thompson with the bull calf," I said as I broke the seal.

Here is what I read, first to myself, and then aloud to Joan:

"Master Neame, I hope to show you to-day that I can make some repayment against past disfavours. I wish to do more and can do more if you will lend me your assistance in a matter not without importance to myself. Can you be in Canterbury on Wednesday of next week together with your man, Will Dyson—I know his quality. I have on hand a public service. It shall be explained to you beforehand with what it imports and if you dislike the narration all I shall ask is your silence. One half, but only one half, of the reason I come to you is that you are better fitted for the responsibility than any other person I know. I shall have a room at 'The Fleur de Lis.' I hope to find means to place this with you without the knowledge of your mother and sister, as it must be for you to decide what they learn, if anything at all, of this request. Ask for me as Captain Luton.

"Jasper Herrill."

"You'll go?" said Joan.

"What plans the man?" I replied. "Some evil I'll be bound."

"After all that happened to-day!"

"Joan," I said suddenly, "I hope you'll be careful."

"Careful!"

"I have been thinking about Herrill's first visit here,

and about his visit to-day. If any harm should come to you through him I——"

Joan, with colour high, reached on her toes and placed a hand over my mouth.

"Vengeance by a great big bloodthirsty brother."

I pushed her from me.

The liveliness went out of Joan, and, looking at me directly in the eyes, she said, "You will not have to hurt anyone on my account. Be at ease, Geoffrey. He is a fine handsome man——"

"Handsome!"

"Yes, handsome. Who can deny it? That is not all. He has courtly manners and a rich voice. You yourself have said that he is brave notwithstanding badness. Each time here he has shown restraint, even some kindliness. I have not seen him otherwise. He is a new sort of man to me. I think he must have a glamour for most women. But if you imagine for all that I can forget he had a part in father's death you are making error. He will never touch me. Fear not."

"That has done me more good than the quart of beer," I said.

At dinner, with Will Dyson at the bottom of the table, Herrill's letter was talked of openly. Mother was dead against any response, Joan saw no reason why I should go, but was quite sure I would, and Will, following liberties with the fat bacon, took a cold leg of turkey to which he was not entitled, and before I could reprove him asked if he might not ride over to Canterbury that afternoon and find out how the two months' pigs were selling.

I went round to the stable with him after dinner, and while he was saddling Polly, I told him to avoid "The Fleur de Lis" and to remember that he was in the city

about the price of young pigs, of which we had upwards of thirty ready to go away.

"I reckon, Master Geoffrey, that they won't know I've even asked a question about aught else."

It was past eight o'clock that night when we heard Will ride into the yard. I had kept Ned Tulks to see to the mare, and I brought Will straight to the kitchen where, warming himself in front of the big wood fire, he gave us the news.

"Twenty rumours," he said, "and the kernel of them all is this, the King and Queen reach Canterbury some time next week."

"The King and Queen!" said mother.

"Aye, the King and Queen."

"Why should they come to Canterbury?" asked Joan.

"They go to Deal or to Dover or to Margate—taking ship."

"Herrill asks for me on the Wednesday," I said. "They may have come and gone by then."

"The earliest they arrive is Tuesday. Wednesday is more likely, so the gossip goes. They stay three days."

"The King can do without you, Geoffrey," said my mother.

"But can I do without the King, mother?" said I cheerily. "A chance to see His Majesty, even from the footpath, comes but seldom."

"Master Herrill's request may have nothing to do with the visit of the King and Queen," said Joan. "Geoffrey, you look for an adventure and imagine one. Most likely you build on a coincidence."

Will Dyson shook his head decisively. "We know our Master Herrill."

When the Wednesday morning came, decision made, Will prepared for our journey with zestful completeness.

He had cleaned the two pistols, extemporised a holster for each from an old cowhide sewn with catgut, and packed plenty of powder and ball. While he provided me with one of the pistols he had given himself other appurtenances—a ten yards length of plough rein (coiled and tied to his saddle bow), and a three pound lump of lead which he declared was handy substitute for a staff at close quarters.

We rode into Canterbury passing St. Augustine's on our right, and when we reached the market place, where the cross roads are, we saw that flags were hung from windows, and that some drooped from a pole near the Wincheap. Across the entry to Mercery Lane evergreens were strung in a kind of festoon.

"May mean little," said Will Dyson. "I'd take off my hat and cheer the King, but I'd fight for the Parliament."

"I don't know that I want to fight for either of them, Will."

Thereupon Will admitted that he had been hasty in view of the lambing season, and the unsown barley.

Having stabled our horses at "The Fleur de Lis," we went through the yard into the taproom and found Host Paramor helping to serve loud-talking friendly farmers and maltsters. He gave me a good grip of the hand, asked after mother, and then raised his eyes in despair when I requested a good big room where I and Will might sleep for a night or two.

"Why come at this time, boy? 'The Fleur de Lis' is full, the City's full. Make for home this evening. Come back when the excitement is over. You know the King and Queen arrive to-day."

"That's why I'm here. Cannot a loyal subject take

a glance at his King when the chance is within a dozen miles? "

"They are all on the same errand, farmers I know and strangers I don't, most of them crying they are good King's men, and Heaven alone knowing whether they speak truth."

"All country folk? I seek an old acquaintance named Luton, strong for the King, I think. I heard he was to rest with you."

"Captain Luton, aye, a gallant cavalier, free with his smiles and his money. Would they were all like him. You'll see him later."

"And this room we're to have? You won't let us sleep in the yard these cold nights."

He rubbed his forehead with his finger. "I have a room at the back choked with old bottles and barrels and odds and ends. If you and Will care to throw out enough of the lumber I'll put in a truckle bed for you and a mattress on the floor for Will."

The chamber was behind the kitchen, with a window opening on the yard, and within an hour Will and I had pitched out sufficient of the old storage to give us sleeping space. It was while a maid and a serving boy were bringing in the bedding that Herrill, having had word of us from Host Paramor, came along the passage.

"Can an old campaigner offer help?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Nay, master, you've come when the work is done," said the perspiring Will.

"Come in, Master Herrill," I said.

When the servants had gone Herrill seated himself on a corner of the truckle bed and I sent Will forth with a word about the horses, and drew out a three-legged milking stool from a corner.

"I am here for the news, Master Herrill."

"That you shall soon have. But first, let me ask what are your political feelings?"

"I would rather hear yours."

He nodded.

"It was but to clear the way. First of all then I, a man against whom you hold offence, am placing myself in your power, and giving you opportunity to do me injury. Many would think me devoid in judgment. I have known you from boyhood and I am a judge of men. Let that be one reason. Another is that if you set yourself to help me I am assured of a measure of shrewdness and much obstinacy—this in spite of your youth. Do not fear flattery, Master Neame. I am telling you in part why I need you. You have a physical strength which makes you the equal of any two or three ordinary men, not a great thing in itself but valuable in the circumstances."

"Altogether a fitting instrument!"

"I shall speak more freely yet. I intend to be as nearly frank with you as I have been with anyone for years. What I tell you will be the truth; it will not be the whole of the story."

"I have much to learn."

"The events in London within the last few weeks have a bearing. The present Parliament, in session for fourteen months, has been sapping the King's privileges, stopping his exactions, taking away from him his part of bloodsucker, in other words, the task and luxury of government have been lifted from his hands. Charles is well-meaning—a weather-cock twisting to the winds of his own narrow little impulses. He cannot abide opposition. He honestly believes the country ought to give him as much money as he wants, no matter how he

spends it, or how it is raised—just because the Almighty has willed it so. He is not wicked as the godly understand the term—only an obstinate weakling with a clever Catholic wife. For years he has unwittingly been progressing to the breaking point. It has come."

The picture of Herrill sitting on a corner of the truckle bed went ill with these words. Was it a Cavalier in slashed silken doublet with lace to his sleeves who was talking to me? Could that be a slender, fashionable rapier resting across his knees?

"A parenthesis is necessary," he said sourly. "My father, Sir John Herrill, of Leicestershire, lent a life-time of devotion to this man's father, and, in a period of royal stress, melted down his plate and sold his lands, and he died in the odour of effusive and gracious promises. Did Charles honour the debts? Not he. He regarded them as a priest regards incense. I treasure the repudiations written by Mr. Secretary to my elder brother, and after his death to myself. I treasure them and they are an inspiration!"

"So all this time you are one of the Parliament men, Master Herrill?"

"I loathe them—loathe them both for their cant and their sincerity—all of them, the hard men and the humbugs. But let me finish the story. A few weeks ago Charles, fool that he is, thought to make a master stroke, went to the House of Commons seeking to arrest certain leaders, Hollis, Hazlerig, Hampden, Pym and Strode. The Commons hustled him out, and the news of the King's attempt set London afire, and I fancy the flames are spreading through the country."

"You serve both sides—is that the answer?"

"You are not without perception, Master Neame. But let me, I pray, steer you right in one small matter.

While I believe Parliament mainly in the right (though now somewhat inclined to overstrain its power), I cannot stand nasal monotones and the minor prophets. A prejudice, I admit, but what would you? I strongly prefer association with my own kind, wrong-headed as they are. I like human men. My experience is that an oath is generally more honest than a text."

"You have refinements—for a spy."

"That will be the least of what I shall be named if matters go amiss—a traitor—a double traitor serving and disserving each side in turn. I promised you frankness."

"I find it overpowering!"

"Spare me the conventicle, Master Neame. Believe me, no person is so bad as his enemies declare, none so good as he believes himself to be. I fight for my own hand. Who among either side does more? A gust of passion, emotion for a worthless King, 'tis but indulgence, a childlike spasm. Zeal for Parliament—how often but self-righteousness. They both lead to danger—what pleasurable sport does not? Here and there an honest man prepared for martyrdom, but to most, to nearly all, one quarter for King or for Parliament and three for self. Very soon gentlefolk will be fighting to preserve their order, yeomen to preserve their homes. Is not that selfishness? Come, Master Neame, let us be men, not boys."

"You have a rare gift for truth and falsity together. I cannot answer you. I would not if I could."

"The outbreak is at hand. Charles relies on much support in the country. He can raise forces but he needs money to pay them. Parliament has cut off his supply. He has one means of getting a large sum. That accounts for his escort of the Queen to Dover."

" The talk is that the Queen takes the young Princess to meet the Prince in Holland to whom she is affianced."

" The excuse serves well. The Queen takes with her from this country the Crown jewels—which belong to England and not to any person. She is selling them abroad to get money for Charles. The value is colossal —we may call it £150,000. There is the reason that Canterbury has the incidental honour of housing their Majesties for a night or two on the way to Dover."

" And what is your purpose arising out of all this? "

" My purpose is with your help to steal the Crown jewels."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PLOT

JASPER HERRILL made his proposal with a certain easy deliberateness, and I gazed at him wide-eyed. What kind of a man was this?

"You aim high," I said at last.

"But to the mark," he replied, "I am no hit or miss highwayman. Careful methods, assiduity in advance—I am told that traders thus make fortunes."

His tone altered.

"Listen, Master Neame, this might be argued a moral mission, certainly a patriotic one. I have used the word 'steal' wrongly. My endeavour is to prevent thieves from escaping with stolen property. It is to retain valuables for their owners. Success will prevent Charles from securing much of the means for warfare. It will save the lives of hundreds of peaceful Englishmen who would be dragged into the quarrel. Many a home will be preserved that otherwise might mourn its losses."

"Do you speak for the Parliament?"

"With authority for the Parliament leaders. You will see why I was able to help you at Splicing Oaks. The paper that I carried was indeed from the sovereign power. It was not from Charles."

"And your rescue of us was part of this plan?"

"It happens to be the truth I would have given that small effort whether you helped me in this or not. Of course, it held the opportunity to approach you."

"I see little of your motive. I suppose I must toss aside a sense of duty."

"You must indeed."

"Equally little do I see of a motive for myself."

"I have yet to supplement my arguments. You will have observed how important it is for the Parliament to prevent these valuables being used to raise an army against the English people. Better far that they should be flung into the sea. On the other hand, even a part of them would help the Parliament in their own undertaking."

"There is a money reward."

"If I secure these jewels I receive from their value the sum of £20,000."

"I begin to see light."

"For your partnership and help I am prepared to pay you a fifth of that sum, namely, £4,000."

"£4,000?"

"You will no longer be an estimable yeoman, but one of the leading gentlemen of Kent."

"And if we fail?"

"We get nothing except the chance of a sword thrust or a bullet."

"Master Herrill, if you have not lived by gambling you will at least die by it."

To my surprise he flared with indignation.

"Not for the love of risk, Geoffrey Neame. Call me no such dolt. Cavaliers and Puritans may rush to danger for their cause. Not I. I am past wishing—the devil rides on my shoulder. This is not for myself."

He took his hat from the floor and rose to his feet.

"Well, Master Neame, you have heard my story, what is your decision?"

I stood up and regarded him. "I have doubts and

fears, but am wishful to join you—I have a debt to pay."

"My plan is to hold up the coach carrying the treasure boxes some way out of Canterbury when the party starts for Dover. What think you of that?"

"Madness, surely."

"Many attempts far more mad will be brought to fruition in the next few months. This is an assured piece of work. You have yet to learn the circumstances. First of all there is no lack of assistance, although for reasons which seem good I am confining my confidence to a band of twelve—good Puritans who would do almost any violence without reward, and with Bible phrases as sanctification. Do you know two-thirds of this old city is for the Parliament? That makes for a measure of safety at the worst."

"What is the strength of the King's retinue?"

"There will be six coaches and altogether about forty people on horses."

"Then any open fighting——"

"Pish, man, am I demented? By one device or another as they start for Dover the treasure coach will lose its place in the middle of the procession, some accident to a wheel, or a broken trace, or a drunken driver will make quite certain the coach goes to the tail. We have expedients already practised. The expedition is haphazard, hurried, touched at root with panic. They'll not be too particular. They have but fifteen miles from here to Dover, and they hasten at the word the wind is fair and the ships in readiness. Outside Canterbury they go round by the little village of Patrixbourne because of flood water on the Dover road. An ambush, a piece of quick work and we are away. Does that sound madness?"

"It sounds wild and perilous."

I walked to the window and called Will from the stables and he came in with a curry-comb in his hand.

" Will, our task is to steal the jewels of the King and Queen."

" Better than I thought, Master Geoffrey."

" There are to be twelve of us to do it."

" Does it need so many? "

" Bravo! " cried Herrill. " I regret more and more that unfortunate thrust."

" The two guineas was not a final accounting? "

" Two guineas? " said Herrill, and remembrance coming to him, he chuckled and put his hand into his breast and brought out a small pouch of coin from which he counted out five guineas for Will. " This is still not the settlement," he said.

Without a word of thanks Will tied the guineas in a corner of his shirt, released for the purpose, and said to me, " I told you it was right we should come to Canterbury."

" May I crave your aid, Will? " said Herrill. " Go down to the tap room and amongst those drinking beer in comparative quiet, probably in a corner, you will see an ox-like man with a broad nose and upstanding hair. He wears a plain leather coat and a sword in his belt. His name is Hickin. Present my compliments and ask if he will favour me with his company."

" Hickin? " I said, as Will left the room.

" Precisely, Thomas Hickin, the maltster of Dover. I met him first at your farm and noted him. Already a proved and trusted man he now has his instructions (signed with a ' P ' I may tell you) to lend himself to our present purpose under my guidance. He knows about you."

When Hickin came in he was hearty and friendly, and in no way confused by his experience at Splicing Oaks. "I am glad you are with us, Master Neame. It is refreshing news, though not surprising."

"Let us know how the affair stands," said Herrill. "Master Neame and his man are in my confidence."

And at that Hickin sketched the arrangements, and the only interruption was once or twice when Will whistled softly to himself. An elm to be crashed across the road near Patrixbourne at the appropriate moment, postilions and guards to be silenced by some of our party, and others with guns to line the fallen elm and prevent the return of the Cavaliers ahead—that was the beginning. Hickin and I were to carry the treasure cases a hundred yards up a side lane to waiting horses with big saddle-bags. Four of us were to ride to Maidstone with the jewels, the remainder of the band drawing off pursuit towards Canterbury. All was clear-cut; I was surprised at the completeness and the exactness of the arrangements. There had already been rehearsals, routes through by-ways had been traversed, even the horses had been tested by Herrill. When we had heard the whole, Will Dyson said, "You have a head, Master Herrill."

"I may not have it long, Will, if this matter goes awry."

"Master Hickin spoke of silencing the guards and postilions," I said. "Do we kill them?"

"It may be necessary," said Herrill; "I do not insist upon it."

"And at Maidstone?"

"We hand over the jewels to a committee already appointed. Master Pym will be there I trust."

"When does our work begin?"

"I purpose that you and I ride out to Harbledown

this afternoon to observe the royal procession as it approaches the city. Reconnaissance is a good prelude to battle."

And thus it came about that Herrill and I after dinner rode the mile and a half to Harbledown, tethered our horses in the grassy lane through which the pilgrims used to drop down to the valley of the Stour, and then mounted the steep bank on the roadside near the church. The country here is undulating, with many twists in the way and high hedges and copses, and we could not see beyond the old leper hospital a hundred yards ahead of us in the dip of the village.

We waited perhaps an hour before we heard the rumble of coming traffic. The noise deepened, there was the sound of horses, and a man's voice rang out apparently with some instruction, and then suddenly the lead of the procession appeared in the village below us, two or three Cavaliers trotting easily and bringing their horses to a walk as they reached the rise of the hill. One turned his head to look back as the first coach came round the corner.

I had expected something in the nature of an ordered cavalcade, riders and coaches within reach of each other, the whole in close military formation as befitted royal dignity and safety. I had not reflected on the wintry state of the roads, the weight of the coaches, nor on how travelling mishaps, such as a locked wheel, a broken breeching, a flint in a hoof, may disarrange progress for minutes and produce gaps only to be partially closed by extra effort. I had passing below me in the next forty minutes a straggling line half a mile in length, the nearest coach fifty yards from its neighbour, others from one hundred to two hundred yards apart. They lumbered along swaying on their leather swings, each drawn

valiantly enough by six horses, the feather on their legs matted by Kentish soil. Between the vehicles were horsemen, all cloaked against the cold, and to my country eyes marked by little difference from each other, though Herrill, leaning against a tree to screen himself from accidental scrutiny, divided them between courtiers and servants of various degrees.

My eyes were on the individual riders, and the first coach was past us before I noticed that its open window would have given me a passing sight of some of those within.

"Ushers and gentlemen-waiters—jammed together with baggage," said Herrill. "Poor devils! Take a look at those following. The tall man on the black horse is Lord Craven. I do not recognise the friend who rides with him. Behind are two servants."

When the second coach reached us I said, "Are they not priests?"

"Yes," said Herrill. "Father Philip and Father Jean are as devoted to Her Majesty as her sweethearts twenty years ago. More important are the riders in the group behind. The one on the right is my Lord of Arundel, the Earl Marshal. As his cloak moves you will see his sleeves are of black velvet. He scorns the fashions. He has a kindly face and a cunning heart. The man on the chestnut is Endymion Porter, gentleman of the bedchamber who always wears a long rapier, but is quicker of head than of hand. On the left are two trumpeters. Those on the further side with grey cloaks are sergeants-at-arms."

As the group went by us beneath, Lord Arundel and Endymion Porter were thick in conversation, but the jingling of harness and the sound of hoofs smothered their words.

"Here comes Charles," said Herrill.

I had a glimpse of scarlet-clad postilions and outriders turning the bend, and I craned forward as eager as any school-boy. I had a touch of awe, for I remembered that round the man now coming into sight had centred years of struggle among the English people; it was likely he might soon divide them into armies against each other. Withal he was the monarch; many held him divinely appointed.

The royal coach was gilt, and richly painted, with large windows. I had no difficulty in seeing the occupants, and I became conscious of sudden extraordinary disappointment. What picture of majesty and dignity I had expected I know not. What I saw was a slight man, muffled to the throat, with a pointed beard, appearing somewhat querulous as the coach jolted him from side to side. His eyes were weary. Was this delicate, peevish-looking person the King of England! He might have been a schoolmaster. In my disillusionment I had no eyes for the Queen and the little Princess by his side. So this was the man who had imposed ship-money!

I stood looking after that gilt coach till it was out of sight with much wonder in me.

"Here are some of the ladies of the suite."

I turned my gaze down to the last coach of the procession, saw three women within it, and then as one of them looked through the window and I distinguished her face I received a shock which swept away all thought of the King. I could not believe that I saw aright; so horrid a thing seemed impossible.

"So this is how you get your information," I said to Herrill.

"Make no hasty judgment," he replied coldly. "You shall hear an explanation."

He said no further word till we were mounted and on the move to Canterbury.

"Mistress Wilford knows nothing of this work of mine. 'Tis a misfortune not a help that she is with the party."

"It looks a natural conjunction."

"'Tis nothing of the sort."

Herrill was brusque yet I felt his concern to take away my suspicions.

"Would I drag a girl into jeopardy thus! Think not so badly of me. Her presence is a complication, a piece of ill-luck. Sir Thomas Wilford in council with the King at Whitehall a week ago is ordered to York to do what he can with the militia—the King to go later. 'Tis a visit of big decisions and hazards, with no place for Cynthia who has hitherto been with him on many journeyings. Wilford is father and mother too. I am unavailable, hidden in secret work, supposedly for the royal cause. Wilford sees opportunity for her safe transport to Waveney which is quite near Dover in this royal progress to the port. Thus it is she travels with the Duchess of Roxburghe, and Lady Dorset in their coach."

"You knew of this?"

"Not till Wilford found me at 'The Mermaid' inn a few hours before his start for York."

"But you went on with your plans?"

"Why should I not? For me a qualm to be conquered, that was all, Neame. You need no telling as to the person whose gain I work for in this business. She has no inheritance, she is poor, the girl you know as Cynthia Wilford."

"Sir Thomas Wilford has position."

"But little property. I count him dead before this

struggle is out. Thus is one protector gone. I fight for my own hand; I am early taking risks—this very week. From now on, despite precautions, I am in danger. Moreover, it is not to be imagined I can escape the mellay when it comes. And so Cynthia Wilford may be left alone."

"Alone?"

"Aye, alone."

We rode fifty yards without speaking and then he said, "There is a chance that I may be hurt or worse than hurt. If so I wish you to take the jewels to Pym. I will write a letter for you. Pym is an honest man. I have had something in advance. There will be other payments. Take your share, satisfy yourself in an accounting for the expenses, and see that Mistress Wilford has the residue. Will you do that?"

"I will not fail to make Mistress Wilford my first care."

"Your words are guarded."

"I shall hold back from no steps if Mistress Wilford needs my help."

"I thank you."

I reflected how this man, with all his brutality and unscrupulousness, was not wanting a vein of good quality. His devotion to Cynthia Wilford was plainly his sole passion. Though I had at first suspected his courtier-like attention to my sister Joan, his deference to my mother, I now had a clue, and saw the possibility of a freakish protectiveness; he had been the author of tragedy for them.

We had covered a hundred yards in silence when I said, "Master Herrill, it is largely for Mistress Wilford you have schemed this affair."

"It is wholly for her."

"Will you not consider that you may send her to ruin?"

"In what manner, pray?"

"Your association with her is known at least to some. If we fail in the attempt and you are recognised—have you thought of that? Suppose the worst—a fatal bullet? A few minutes ago we were discussing such an accident. What then of Mistress Wilford?"

A change came in his face, and his voice was hoarse.

"Have I not thought of it? Has it not cankered my nights? I will not be tortured by such cowardice, Neame, it is my one great chance for her."

"You make her share this deadly gamble."

"I am not indifferent. I have lost sleep, but my decision is firmly made. I go straight forward."

Herrill's face became gloomy and set and we rode on without more speech till near St. Dunstan's Church, and then he spoke as though from a sudden resolve. "Neame, you know the dangers of an unguarded young girl among the gallants at court."

"I have heard tales."

"There is a man named George Goring—Colonel Goring—he has been pursuing Mistress Wilford. I persuaded her to definite affiance with me—'twas some protection. He is in London—one reason Wilford could not leave her there. I seek an honest man—Heaven knows if I have found him. Should disaster come, remember Goring. Take Cynthia to Wilford. Tell her it was my wish."

"I am a stranger."

"She will trust you. I wish to guard a chance. The whole thing is but a possibility."

The strain went from his voice. "This is not the

mere jealousy of a lover, Neame; no frenzy from a rival, you know that? "

"Even so there is nought to be ashamed of."

"I wish you to know it is not for myself but for her," he said fiercely.

As we rode in by the West Gate over the new gravel, scattered to make easy the passage of the King's procession, Herrill said to me, "Do you know anything of swordsmanship? "

"Nothing."

"I must give you the first lessons."

CHAPTER EIGHT

COLONEL GORING

HERRILL, at "The Fleur de Lis" next evening, had a tingling at the enterprise in spite of himself.

"You and I to-night, Master Neame, are the two most important men in England. On the working of our brains in the next few hours is fate wrapped up for many."

He did not know, nor did I, that the outcome of the undertaking was to depend not on clever planning or robust purpose, but on the feelings of a girl of seventeen who even as we talked was muffling sobs in her pillow.

News had come to Cynthia Wilford which blinded and frightened her. She fluttered for escape like a bird in a cage. She thought of flight; her home at Dover, with the harbour of the old servants, was but fourteen miles away. But the courage went out of her as she remembered it was ten at night, with the doors of the deanery bolted and barred, with royal guards on duty, and beyond them the great gate secured till the morning hours.

She sat on the stool by the side of her bed, with the candle on the floor near her and tried to still her fears. She went over once more the story she had heard, fighting to find a glimpse of hope. Cruel exaggeration was possible, but sorrowfully enough she had to dismiss the idea that what she had heard was wholly false—an elaborate lie made up with an intention. Demonstration was so near at hand and so inevitable that none but a fool would

build on a damaging untruth. And he who told the story was no fool. Alas no! If Herrill were in Canterbury why was he concealing himself from her? Why, indeed, but for the reason so clearly and subtly given, treachery to the King?—though in what direction even her visitor could give no guide but guesses. Further work on the militia, perchance? Observation on the King's Kentish friends flocking around him? Even an attempt to capture His Majesty's person? Who was to say? Herrill was ruthless and very capable.

Cynthia's informant, so suave, so certain, had begged of her to be brave. Herrill had been suspect for weeks. He was now in Canterbury under a false name, hiding himself from her who should have been his uttermost confidante. He had agreed willingly, and eagerly, no doubt, to her being placed in the Court circle, and for what purpose he had thus agreed she must make her own suppositions.

She had flashed out her indignation and denials but her heart was cold and heavy. He seemed to read her well, this visitor of hers. He had shaken his head sadly, and there was authority behind his gentle manner. She shivered as she recalled his regardfulness, put her hands over her face to shut out his tall handsome presence, the gallant way he carried his head. In the quietness of the room she could still hear his low tones as he gave his reasonings and pleaded with her. A King's officer in the King's confidence, could he hold his peace, could he refuse protection for his Royal master? His plight was hardly less painful than hers. The latter, he admitted, had special poignancy: in the confidence of my Lady Roxburghe, open to trustful conversations, and before her eyes and open to her ears continually that which would be priceless to enemies. Herrill's contrivances, whatever

they were, must soon be known and her part would then be judged. Branded, branded he feared, so unjustly and yet so certainly as a spy—she the noblest and sweetest of her sex! Respectfully he begged her to reflect and take the proper action. Let her remember she was the daughter of Sir Thomas Wilford—would to Heaven her father was not so far away! By reason of ancient friendship for Sir Thomas, to say nothing of reverence for his daughter, there would be silence for a while—it must be only for a while—so that Mistress Wilford might decide, as assuredly she would decide, on the only course possible for her honour and sweet womanhood.

Anguished hours for Cynthia that night were brought to an end by the blessed assertiveness of youth and health. From refreshing sleep she awakened in the obscurity and cold of the February morning with a measure of hope and with a plan.

Only the servants were astir, and with such flimsy reasons as occurred to her she went forth, passed through the big gate along Mercery Lane, and thence to "The Fleur de Lis." She turned down the side lane by the inn, and, reaching the entrance to the stable yard, observed through the breaking light Will Dyson out to see to the needs of Polly and the roan. She took him for one of the servants of the inn, and stepped forward with a silver coin in her hand. Would he convey a message to Captain Luton? Will scratched his head, took the coin, went through the big doorway of the inn and came straight to me. I went to the window (not so close as to be observable) and looked out through the murk at Cynthia Wilford. I can see her now—her slim little figure, wrapped in a dark tawny coat, with wide hanging sleeves of fur and, peeping from beneath, a camlet kirtle. A close-fitting hood could not shut in little wisps of black

wavy hair, and these, with her big eyes, and a pallor showing through her dark skin, made her elfin-like and fragile.

"Go and take her to the wood-shed," I said, and then I went for Herrill.

I sat and waited on the mounting stone near the stable pump, watching "The Fleur de Lis" ostler at work, and Will engaged with Polly and the roan, but with an eye ready to the yard against intruders.

I was more nervous than at any moment since I had set my hand to this mad venture. The sight of Cynthia Wilford gave me a kind of inward excitement,—took from me other interests. I wondered if all men felt the same with her. Maybe, thought I, my yeoman's imagination was touched at the refinements and deep mysteries that come from birth and breeding. Yet I had seen gentlewomen before—common clay enough.

Herrill took five minutes with Cynthia in the wood-shed before he came to the door and beckoned me. As I reached him he said, "Goring is here," and there was nothing in voice or manner to indicate the rage tearing at his heart. We went into the shed, where Cynthia stood near the opening which served for a window on the farther side.

"Master Neame is with me on some public work, Cynthia. I am trusting him. I wish you to do the same."

She made a little bow and then she stood motionless and expressionless, except that her eyes burned like coals. I judged she was surprised that Herrill should bring a stranger to the knowledge of her anxieties, and recruit him to an affair so intimate. Our past association, so recent as time counted, was dimmed by the present emergency. Nothing remained of that remorse-stricken

creature with her passionate declaration at Poison Cross. Far, far away were those happenings; tragedy of another kind was at the gate.

Herrill made her sit down on a square block used for the chopping of faggots. Then he turned to me, and in level voice told me of Cynthia's ordeal. Goring, it seemed, was to take the place of Lord Dorset, and had reached Canterbury but a few hours after the King.

He turned to Cynthia. "Do you think you could stand the neighbourhood of this man for another twenty-four hours?"

"Twenty-four hours?"

"Till the party reaches Dover. You leave them then. At Dover you are on the threshold of home."

"He may pursue me. There are but the servants, Tabitha, old Jacob and the two maids."

"I shall be there ahead of you."

"You there!" I exclaimed.

"I carry out my business here, then leave immediately for Dover across country. To you, Master Neame, falls the responsibility for completing our task. You will be eagerly awaited at Maidstone."

"What is all this?" cried Cynthia, standing up. "Why cannot I be with you now? What is this task you speak of? Goring——"

Herrill raised his hand to quiet her.

"Your story was the more pressing. You have now to hear mine."

He made her sit down and then he explained to her as he had to me on the first evening. While he talked Cynthia was transfixed and wordless. He was earnestly persuasive, and yet in all his intenseness affection for the girl shone out.

"I must do this thing, Cynthia. It is the one

great opportunity I have had to provide for you. I shall never have another. You will help me? "

His voice dropped away and he looked at her, and for a second or two we were all silent. Her fingers were twisting inside one another. Her mouth was puckered. Her shoulders were unsteady. The pain and dread of an animal in a trap I knew well; I had the sight before me now. When her voice came, she burst out:

" How can I? How can I? "

" I know the effort, Cynthia. Do I not share it? Goring, you can bear with his importunity for a few hours."

" He is very strong and wicked; I feel like a mouse with him. He commands me. But the other, how can you ask me to do the other? "

She put her hands together appealingly.

" Forego it. Forego it. Let me be poor. I shall be far happier. Undo this terrible plan, I do beg of you."

Herrill, even Herrill made of stone, fidgetted. As for me, I turned and walked to the door and stared out into the yard.

" Robbery, just robbery. 'Tis naught beside."

" The robbery has already been made. I but restore the stolen property."

" And I, with everyone so kind! Consider, will you not consider? "

I heard her sobbing. Herrill spoke with a harder note.

" This is man's work. Listen, Cynthia, I plan for you; you cannot plan for yourself. Master Neame, may I trouble you? "

The girl had her face in her hands as I stepped slowly with him across the wood-shed in talk.

" I fear no exposure from Goring," said Herrill. " His suspicions truly based are unfortunate. But he

uses the situation for his own purpose to terrify Cynthia. He cannot make her responsible for what I do. At any talk of a collusion send for Wilford. But Goring will not make any charge. With me an outcast, he will find his chance with Cynthia. All this looks to the extremity. I shall not be an outcast."

I walked silently with him towards the girl.

"What is your objection, Master Neame?"

"Mistress Wilford should leave the party not at Dover but here and now. Some excuse—illness——"

"Impossible. She sentences herself. She might even break our scheme by it. Besides, her presence keeps Goring quiet."

"I do not understand you," I said.

"Would you withdraw?"

"You are set that Mistress Wilford shall have purgatory," I said doggedly.

Then Cynthia spoke, and I was taught my place.

"I am ungrateful, I will do my best. I ought to do what you wish. It will soon be over."

I, a farmer hired for help, with my rustical fears! The blood came to my face.

"There," said Herrill.

The heartlessness of the man struck me cold. Was there ever such a lover?

"No need for further words about it," I said as carelessly as I could. "Your next move?"

"Since Goring knows of Captain Luton at 'The Fleur de Lis,' Captain Luton leaves within the hour for London. Meanwhile, perhaps you can secure accommodation at 'The Falstaff' for—for whom shall we say? for Master Duxton, a Cavalier, a friend of yours who arrives at midday from Rochester."

"I will see to it."

"Cynthia, Master Neame will attend you to the Cathedral gate."

"It is not necessary," she said, in something of a flurry.

"It is advisable. Master Neame is known and respected in Canterbury. Do as I desire, Cynthia." He put his arm round her and kissed her on the forehead.

"Then we had better go," she said.

She passed through the door-way to the yard; before I could follow Herrill said: "Master Neame, make no mistake. I would like you to know that I appreciate the care you have manifested this morning for Mistress Wilford."

I could have sworn the man was moved.

"Oh, that," I said, and went out into the yard after Cynthia.

Without speaking we walked side by side to the High Street. Her steps were hurried, and I knew the tremors and the shrinking that must be within her. To reach the Cathedral precincts, to get away from me, friendly intruder though I might be, to enwrap herself in her private miseries without a stranger's gaze, here was the immediate goal.

Beyond a guiding word as we threaded our way across High Street amid straggling country carts, I said nothing. As we turned the corner at "The Checkers" inn, with only the length of Mercery Lane between us and the gate of the Cathedral, I was trying to throw my thoughts to the work ahead with Herrill.

The busyness of Mercery Lane, not only by reason of its shops but because it forms a passage from the High Street to the front of the Cathedral, explains why I did not notice the man till he was within a couple of yards of us. There was the usual eddying stream of people

at that hour of the morning, a portly citizen or two, possibly bound for the Burghmote, a sharp-nosed lawyer with quill behind his ear, apprentices shouldering rolls of cloth, market women with baskets of vegetables, here and there a farmer looking at the shops, and a milkman with yoke and buckets. From amidst the current a tall Cavalier appeared directly in front of us. He was a fine figure, carrying head and shoulders in a gay, commanding sort of way. A big purple plume was on his hat, his doublet and breeches were of bright silk with broad stripes, lace was at his cuffs and throat, his soft, broad-top boots creaked as he walked, a sure sign of fashion. At his left side, with its hilt tilted forward invitingly, was a rapier. His blue eyes were alight with surprise as he came to a halt in front of us, and swept off his hat in a low bow.

"Mistress Wilford, what cruel urgency sends a lady forth at this hour?"

His voice was rich and ringing. I felt at once his air of possession—something of reproof and protection.

"With friends in Canterbury, Colonel Goring, I have to seek them early, for my day will be much occupied."

"The unwisdom of early morning sallies will be known with more experience, Mistress Wilford. The freedom of an old friend. 'Tis my good fortune to see you to your lodging."

She drew back half a step.

"A yard or so only, I will not trouble you, sir. Master Neame attends me."

For the first time he threw me a full glance. One could almost hear him saying, "Master Neame! And who the devil is Master Neame?" By the absence of finery he knew I was no gentleman; a plain cloak and unplumed hat told the tale; but my six feet four inches

of stature (topping his own by a hand's breadth) might at least have made him curious. He guessed, I suppose, I was a poor relation or possibly some lusty servitor from the Wilford Home; at any rate he saw she used me as an excuse and he was not the man to suffer such trivialities.

" We will allow Master Neame to go his way, assuring him you are in safe keeping."

His smile was kindly.

Surprised indeed was he when, moving a little forward to confront him and at the same time partially to cover Cynthia, I said in civil tone : " Mistress Wilford is pressed for time. May I ask of you a passage? "

His haughty stare was unavailing, and he ought to have known no servant could have given him look for look as I did. Yet in his futility he classed me as some underling. He turned to Cynthia as if I had not spoken.

" I think we have delayed enough," he said, silkily.

Then I had a lesson in the methods of courtly disdain used for under-dogs who do not know their position. I was half in front of Cynthia and did not move as he came on. He looked through me, expected me to step on one side, and I, on my part, thought he would pass on my right. A few inches from me he was perforce brought to a stop, but to all appearance he was still ignorant of my existence, and then pressing on over me, as it were, he placed his foot on mine, exerted all his pressure and glanced up as if he encountered some unforeseen and inconsiderable obstacle. He thought that with a howl of pain, perhaps with an apology, I should hop away.

I did not hear Cynthia's startled " Oh ! " I took him by the throat, and in the second that his hand fumbled for his sword-hilt, I had thrust him backward over his heels, and then, half-choking as he was, I shook him to

and fro with all my power, while his scabbard rattled an accompaniment on the cobbles. People were running up and I pulled him erect and with a great thrust sent him spinning like a teetotum across the lane, and his head struck with a crash the door-post of the linen shop kept by Master Drayton. It was the first time I knew of my full strength with blood warmed.

I kept some wits about me.

"A drunken roysterer," I shouted; "out all night, then seeks the morning to insult a woman."

The precaution was scarce needed; there was little sympathy with Cavaliers in Canterbury streets just then. In the hubbub that arose I heard such calls as "Bravely done," "Bring the watch," "Old Neame's touch," "To the river with him."

To a weaker man than Goring, or one with a thinner skull, that throw of mine would probably have meant death. From him it took the senses for some seconds. He struggled to his feet, with blood trickling from his head. As he staggered a step or two, recovering, I noticed that Cynthia had fled and was disappearing in the Cathedral gate-way.

I picked up Goring's big feathered hat from the middle of the lane, pushed through the people and handed it to him.

"We want no sign of you left here," I said.

He was spirited, I grant him that. He composed his face, shaken as he was.

"This will be dealt with fittingly."

At his words mutterings came from those around, and he reared himself and said scornfully, "I am here in the service of the King. If this rabble will let me through ——"

"Make way there," I cried.

CHAPTER NINE

I MAKE MY STROKE

"SIR JOHN PENNINGTON has come from Dover with news of adverse winds. The departure is delayed."

It was afternoon, and Herrill and I were in his room at "The Falstaff" following continuous hours of scheming and a dozen meetings in different parts of the city.

"You have the tidings quickly."

"I possess two well-paid grooms in the King's service."

I whistled my surprise.

"Arranged in London beforehand," he said impatiently. "An easy matter. To them falls the task of discovering a loose horse-shoe, a nail missing in a tyre, a refractory lynch-pin, something which may delay one coach or possibly two."

"You have thoroughness," I said.

We fell to talk on remodelments which now were necessary.

Canterbury in the main was sympathetic to the Parliament but there was a body of Charles' adherents in the city; in addition the visit of the King and Queen meant excitement to many who had no very strong opinion, and to all young people. The King was a sight to be seen.

Everywhere was bustle and interest, and at least a semblance of enthusiasm. Any lukewarmness on the part of the Mayor and Burghmote was counter-balanced by the zeal of the Dean and Chapter. And the city

being in pleasurable movement, and expectant, with hundreds of strangers from the country-side, from Ashford, Margate and other places mixing with the townspeople in the streets, Herrill was able to conduct his plotting almost openly.

I might have been in a glow at his daring and his coolness had I not realised increasingly as the hours went by the intricacies and perils of our undertaking. This was to be no easy and certain venture such as he sketched in all sincerity at our first talk in the "Fleur de Lis." We could, for example, have no assurance as to the position of the treasure coach, and it might be that our attack upon it would lead to a fight with three parts of the procession, possibly with the whole of it. Moreover, the men to be with the party were more than had been expected. About fifty attendants, ranging from the gentleman usher downwards to the footmen, with Lord Arundel, Colonel Goring, Lord Granville, Sir John Pennington, Lord Craven—all practised men of war—guaranteed no child's play. Well armed they must all be, by the very nature of their errand.

Herrill with time to spare had sent a rider to Maidstone for further help.

"I must have some practised men-at-arms. I'll not rely entirely on pious chaw-bacons."

All day long in the midst of our own activities we observed the preparations being made for the journey to Dover and beyond. Farriers were busy, gun-smiths, corn merchants, harness-makers, boot-makers and linen drapers; axles had to be greased, breechings repaired, three of the horses replaced, and much of the baggage reloaded into the coaches. A large part of the energies afoot were to be seen by all, and the other was no hard guesswork; it happened that in time to come I was to

know from one who was present some of the lights and shades of the indoors story.

The Deanery was a-buzz. Rarely had the garden path from the Cathedral Close to the main door been so trodden, for there were messengers to and from London each to be interviewed by Secretary Nicholas, Kentish gentlemen like Sir William Boteler, Sir Anthony Leger and Sir Robert Darell proffering homage; courtiers, too, Endymion Porter and Lord Craven required by Charles for council. The wide open space around the Cathedral was lively of sight and sound, with saddle horses and coaches, with gay liveries and uniforms; and over all the rattle of harness, the jingle of accoutrements, the occasional call of a bugle.

The Dean's large dining-room had become "Our court at Canterbury" and there sat Charles in a big oak chair, poring over documents, sometimes throwing his head back with a touch of puzzlement or indignation, breaking in with a word or two to Sir Edward Nicholas, the secretary, with facile mind and manners, who, unlike his royal master, was perceiving the strength of the storms ahead, and had begun to bury himself in detail with a kind of loyal despair.

Charles fingered a quill, though he wrote not; the top button of his velvet doublet was unfastened; he played the part of a man worried with petty affairs.

"Sire, Pennington says he has not sufficient transportation for coaches, horses and baggage."

"Make a warrant for him to take up extra vessels. I shall require to know the cost."

"The Earl Marshal wishes a specially strong ship."

"'Tis his dignity not his safety he thinks of. Let him have it."

Nicholas's quill scratched diligently.

"Goring should be here, why is he late?" said Charles.

He rose from his chair and addressed the young courtier in attendance who stood by the window. "Granville, what think you of Goring? Will he be staunch? I value him. Yet he once talked with Pym."

"A strong commander, sire. I cannot read his heart."

The King walked to and fro, his hand to his head. "There was Strafford—— Look you, Granville, I have no distrust of Goring."

Granville bowed.

"Forgive me, sire," said Nicholas. "You must settle about the ships at Dover. Pennington awaits your word."

"Bring hither the list. 'The Lion.' Write in the margin 'for the Queen and Princess Mary.' 'The Entrance,' a smaller ship. Whom do you suggest?"

"The Duchess of Richmond and her people. 'The Providence' might do for the Queen's servants."

"Write it so. 'The Bona Venture,' a powerful ship with much ammunition. Such escort is not necessary."

"There is reason for a strong ship, sire."

"With the events in Ireland! No, no."

Nicholas still hesitated. "Sire——"

"Give me your pen," said Charles, and then with nervous haste he wrote against "Bona Venture," "Let her go on her journey to Ireland."

Through a paper of requirements, in face of petulant diversions, did Nicholas steer the way. Questions as to the port of landing, the Queen's subsequent action and the provision of money, were forced on the King, and though the resulting commands were often enough but open authority to servants, yet did the assiduous secre-

tary secure some sort of a settled programme on which he could proceed.

Nicholas was mentioning the necessity of sending the vessel with beer straight from London to Holland when there was a knock at the door, and Goring was announced. The King looked up frowning. I can see him—a slender man, trim in habit, with pale forehead on which the lines showed—irritation and dignity in one.

"We have expected you this hour past, Colonel Goring."

"A small accident, sire."

And then Charles noticed the strip of plaster on Goring's forehead, the big reddening bruise on his cheek-bone.

"What is this? You are not hurt?"

Concern was in the King's voice, more than concern, a hint of alarm.

"'Tis but a trifle, sire; a patch of slipperiness, a piece of apple peel, perchance. I fell in the lane without and buttressed my head on a doorway. Nothing serious, but it required attention."

Charles sighed as though with relief.

"Not the first blow you have had on my behalf, Goring."

Goring inclined his head. "Nor the last to be received or given, I trust."

"I have good servants," said the King gravely. "You may leave us, Granville. Come over by the window, Goring. I want to talk to you about the militia in the North."

In another part of the Deanery there was haste and commotion. The Queen had letters to write, and frequent consultations with the Duchess of Richmond, the

Duchess of Roxburghe and Lady Dorset on gowns to be worn, the health of the young Princess, the provisions to be taken on " The Lion." The hardness of the cushions in the royal coach brought from her some frank remarks. She had to receive the morning salutations of Father Philip—Father Jean being somewhat discomposed after the journey the day before. Meanwhile a pale girl was flitting hither and thither at the behest of the Duchess of Roxburghe, fetching needles here, a pack of cards there, searching through boxes for devotional books which Her Majesty had mislaid, full of fears, as she had reached the Deanery from out of Mercery Lane. When she heard that Goring was with the King she was almost numbed. Presently from her window she saw him depart on his way down towards the Burgate. A tiny hope grew up in her.

About noon next day Will and I mounted our horses at " The Fleur de Lis " and set off southwards with all appearance of making our way home to Eastry. We bent to the left after we left the city in order to avoid the Dover road, and our circuitous line and the mud in the by-ways made it past one o'clock before we reached our meeting-place, the point of command it might be called, —a sheltered corner of turf behind a thicket of bramble rearing itself along a bank. The grassy hollow branched from a cow track which led to the Patrixbourne road a couple of hundred yards away. Here in this nook was to be brought the treasure, and here already were horses,— Herrill's, Hickin's, and two others belonging to members of the party who, with Will Dyson, were to come to Maidstone. Herrill had provided an extra man in addition to his substitute, for he had foreseen that were we fortunate our load might be so heavy some division of it might make for quicker riding.

Leaving Will Dyson to follow after he had tied up the roan and Polly, I walked down the cow track to the place where it was planned to make the attack. The roadway lay between banks four feet high or more on which were hedges of briar, maple and hazel, laced with the bine of honeysuckle. Here and there trees stood in the hedge or just behind it—elms for the most part, and thanks to the ditches which skirted the undergrowth, they inclined at a gentle angle over the road. Herrill and Hickin, with axe and saw, bittle and wedges lying round on the ground near them, were by the side of the tree which had been chosen. It was partly sawn through, a wedge inserted in the cut. Three heavy blows with the bittle would send the tree across the roadway.

"Pray we do not have a breeze in the next half-hour," I said; "we might stop the whole procession instead of the last two coaches."

"We had to take a chance of that. Let's cross over and observe our forces. They're behind those clumps of alder and holly in the field opposite. The horses are in the hollow to the left."

We descended into the road, shiny with the rain, walked twenty yards along and climbed through a break in the other hedge, and then round the corner of the alders we came upon our friends. They were in two or three groups, talking together in low tones or looking to their weapons; those who had pistols were shielding them from the rain under their cloaks. While Herrill exchanged a word or two with young Squire Westall from Barham, who was in charge on this side of the road, I looked over the company. No men to be taken lightly, was my first thought, for all were overlain with purposefulness. A minister from Wingham had tall boots; his face was white and set. He was one of those

with a pistol. A couple of farmers with begrimed buskins and horny hands had a blunderbuss apiece, deadly enough at a close mark. A furrier from Chartham wore a borrowed sword in his belt; I guessed some shooting piece was under the sacking near the hedge. A young man with rapier and gay doublet peeping from beneath his cloak was probably a friend of Westall's. A tanner from Sturry—a long, lean man who had served some time in the militia—was nursing a harquebus with barrel over three feet long, and round his waist was a belt with priming box and bullet bag. A piece of blanket over his shoulders protected the lock of the harquebus from the wet. On the ground near his feet was the ironwork. The strangers fetched from Maidstone—ten altogether—were so much alike in equipment that they might have been soldiers except that they had high crowned hats instead of head-pieces. They wore stout leather coats with deep skirts, and each had a carbine slung by a bandolier from the neck. Two of them sat on a tree trunk under the shelter of the holly examining their snaphaunces.

I felt the atmosphere of violence. These visitors to the Dover Road were not playing at plotting. If ever death was written among men it was outlined in that scattered band.

I left Herrill talking to young Westall, recrossed the road, took Will from muttered confidences with Hickin, and walked with him back to the dell where our horses rested.

" Hickin tells me a mounted man watches from the top of the hill outside Canterbury for the start, and then comes on with the warning," said Will.

" He blows a bugle for a signal as he approaches," I said. " That gives another minute for preparation.

The coaches may travel fairly fast on the piece of good road out of Canterbury."

"He don't forget anything, that man Herrill," said Will.

"When we reached the horses I gave Will my father's ring for my mother in case ill should befall me, and then I made him get from his saddle-bags the hempen plough reins, now cut into six feet lengths.

"Fetch Herrill here to me," I said.

Will turned without a further word and plodded off down the track. Within a few minutes he was back, accompanied by Herrill.

"Perdition, Neame. What's this? We have no time for chatter."

I went up to him.

"A word in your ear."

Then I put my arms round him with a grip which was like enough to have broken a rib or two, lifted him like a child from the ground and threw him. He struggled like a polecat. The power of the man was astonishing for his moderate size. For a moment or two we were wrestling but he had no mortal chance but one, —and that he failed to take. Had he shouted loudly for help he might have been heard by those away on the road. Instead he gasped a fearful oath, and that was all before my knee pinned him by the throat. While I stuffed a kerchief in his mouth, Will, with some of the lengths of plough rein in readiness, was tying his ankles; and then I gave him a twist on to his face and got his wrists together behind his back, and Will secured those also. His eyes were near to bursting from their sockets, and as I tied a second kerchief round his mouth he made a vicious snap at my fingers with his teeth; I think they would have gone to the bone if I had not been very

quick. Herrill lay bound and voiceless on the grass within four minutes of the time he had reached the dell. I stood up and got my breath.

" Go and fetch Hickin," I said to Will, and he set off on his errand.

Then I turned round and delivered myself to the man at my feet.

" Master Herrill—when you first told me your story I did not intend to join in this robbery. I am no footpad. I had a thought of checkmating you as payment for past offences. That mood went. I should probably have gone off with Will Dyson, leaving you to play your tragic prank alone, and unbetrayed at least by me, but I found that one whom I thought an affectionate lover was half-crazy, was a brute. I saw you torture Mistress Wilford. Her loyalty did not touch you nor her affection. Was it nothing to you that she was to suffer hell? Is it nothing that at this moment, coming towards us, she is suffering hell? "

The temper had gone from him, as it had mounted in me. He looked at me wonderingly.

" This I tell you," said I, in a rage which surprised myself; " that rather than you should have carried this thing through I would have put a bullet in your brain. I cannot think Kent would be any the worse for your absence."

I was standing over him now, pouring my wrath down on him, and, Heaven help me!—there seemed a half-smile in his eyes.

I heard the call of a pewit, and I walked over to Polly, took one of Will's pistols from his home-made holster, and walked off down the cow-track. I came upon the two twenty yards along.

" A moment," I said, and they stopped; and I walked

to Will and gave him the pistol,—at which it may be supposed Hickin saw nothing remarkable in view of all we had to do. Will stepped back four or five feet and raised the pistol on a level with Hickin's head. I had some of the lengths of plough-rein over my arm.

"Hickin," I said, "this is life or death."

He looked at me bewildered; his wide-open eyes reminded me of those of a bullock.

"Do I shoot him, Master Geoffrey?" said Will.

"Not yet. Hickin, I am going to tie you up. You will be safe if you submit. If not I make certain of you otherwise. Place your hands behind your back."

"What the——"

"No parley. Will, pull the trigger when I've counted three."

With a stunned look Hickin linked his fingers behind him. I went to him and once I had hold of his wrists he had no chance. I fastened him securely, threw him to the soft dirt, and tied his ankles as Herrill's had been tied.

Then we went back to Herrill, and while Will was arranging the horses for our departure I walked over to the prostrate man.

"I want you to know," I said, "I bear you no ill-will in spite of my harshness just now."

He turned his head stiffly to look at me, and I could perceive the sneer on his lips. It said as plainly as might be, "Alack-a-day, how kind a gentleman!"

"I have kept my promise to you about taking care of Mistress Wilford."

He rolled on the wet grass and turned his face away from me.

Two minutes later Will and I had mounted and were making a roundabout way across the fields. Before we

struck the Dover road below Patrixbourne, a bugle note rang out away behind us through the falling drizzle, and then again, and once again.

I thought of Cynthia, miserable and frightened in her coach; of that crowd waiting by the alders, looking for action by their leaders near the elm. I could see the procession lumbering by, could feel the tenseness of the watchers, and note their counting of the vehicles. There would be guns peeping through the hazel, a dozen men at the break in the hedge ready for a rush. Then would come that devastating moment when no tree fell, the space while all went by in safety and there was silence.

I pictured the minutes of confusion afterwards, the rush across the road, the sight of the wedged tree with no one near, and then the scurry down the cow-track to our rendezvous. There my imagination stopped. I only knew we had to make good going.

When we were well advanced on the high road and not five miles from home, Will said to me:

"What lie are we going to tell them at the farm?"

"Better than any lie is silence."

"As good a lie as any other," said Will.

CHAPTER TEN

CYNTHIA AT BAY

WITH the bugle sounding in my ears, my veins hot with effort I was without elation. Will Dyson's cackling, the " drubbety-drub " of our horses' hoofs upon the road were the echo of a disappointment to which I hardly dared to give a name. No one could have come forth from an adventure more successfully, but was it for adventure alone that I had sallied from Eastry to Canterbury?

The hope of seeing her, of hearing her speak to me in friendly tones, of making her feel I was no enemy—I could not look for more. How little had come to me! In my craving to be near her for a time her affiance to Herrill was not a feather on my conscience; as well charge with dishonour the daffodil in the spring thrusting forth its green spear to the sunlight.

The future was empty and in this was my depression as we rode away to Splicing Oaks. I had saved her and in doing so had planted in her not gratitude but something very different—contempt, detestation. How could it be otherwise? To avenge my father I had in treachery overturned the man she loved!

While I thus reflected there was travelling from Canterbury towards Patrixbourne a swaying coach with square, heavy body and domed roof, carrying within it the touch of coming tragedy. Side by side sat Lady Dorset and the Duchess of Roxburghe, the latter with a silk handkerchief to her lips to disguise the occasional

hiccoughing which she suffered on such journeys. In the corner facing Lady Dorset was Cynthia, with feelings which put the discomfort of travel out of existence. No longer could the activities of hand and foot help conceal from herself as from others exhaustion and fear. From the time she had taken her place in the coach despair enwrapped her and half-froze her. Her companions, uncomfortable themselves, imagined her depressed by the prospect of that sickness of sea-voyagers which was the accompaniment of coach travelling for many. Still and silent in her corner Cynthia awaited the catastrophe. Disjointed anticipations flashed before her—the sudden great noise, the jarring halt, horses rearing, the rush of men, shouts and pistol shots, and the shine of steel. Her coach was immediately in front of the treasure. Unconsciously she strained her ears——

And she was thus torturing herself when she looked through the window at her side and found they were passing through a village, that fields and hedges had disappeared. She saw an old church, an inn, a man leading a team of horses home from the plough, a woman standing in the shelter of her cottage eaves with her little boy by the hand, watching the coaches go by.

She held her breath. Had the fatal spot been reached and passed? Could this be Patrixbourne? Yes, there was the old pump and trough where she and her father had once watered their horses.

She kept her face to the window to get control of herself. Then with a word about the rain she peered through the peep-hole of talc at the back of the seat. She discerned riders with wet dripping from their cloaks and behind them, faintly enough, the leading horses of the next coach. She dropped back to her place and Lady Dorset said:

"Are you sick, Cynthia?"

"I am dizzy with this rocking."

"I, too," said the Duchess. "The sea itself cannot be worse."

Winter twilight had fallen when the procession came to a stop a little distance from the Castle hill at Dover; here it was that some of the horsemen and two of the coaches turned off into the town. Cynthia looked out into a medley of footmen hurrying with messages, Cavaliers standing beside steaming horses, and gentlemen-in-waiting or ushers picking their way from coach to coach with questions and instructions. Her eager eyes were roving to and fro in search of old Jacob when Endymion Porter came up to the coach door.

"Now, Mistress Wilford."

"Is my—is Jacob here?"

"Whether or no, you are to be home in the best of company very swiftly."

As Cynthia was handed from the coach, she saw Goring standing near his big black horse. Fastened behind the saddle was a pillion.

Dismay was in her and she turned to look first in one direction and then in another along the line of vehicles and moving figures.

"Old Jacob may be here."

"He would have found you by this time," said Goring. "If he is at the Castle he shall follow."

Here was no gallant pushing himself upon a pretty damsel, only a gentleman of degree with his devoir to perform.

"Are there no horses?" said Cynthia. "The ride to me is nothing. I could spare the time and trouble of Colonel Goring."

"A nag would have to be fetched from the town I

fear. And I shall be back before weary sojourners and baggage are within the walls."

"If my horse were as big as yours——" began Porter.

"Black Crow will enjoy it," said Goring, with a wave of the hand.

Cynthia made up her mind.

"I must needs be grateful for Colonel Goring's offer."

A minute later she was perched behind him on the comfortable pillion saddle, obtained from she knew not where, only she guessed that to find a horse for her would have been as easy as to find that pillion saddle, had Goring so willed it. Her manner was blithe. She kissed the tips of her fingers to Lady Dorset and the Duchess, and laughed a good-bye to Porter.

Then Goring touched his horse on the neck and they started on their way.

"You are used to the saddle, Mistress Wilford, so I am making a good pace. This is a pleasant duty, but others are in waiting."

"The faster the better."

The road to Waveney branched off some two miles clear of Dover, and Cynthia, who had known every yard from childhood, could pick out the passing trees like old friends.

Ahead in the drop of the road by the cluster of ash was the turning on the right leading to Waveney. Goring must lessen the speed there because stretches which in summer were hard turf became in winter soft and wearisome for horses. Black Crow's fetlocks would go deep. She touched his shoulder and he pulled his horse to a walk as she explained the way and the conditions. She was anxious he should set her down at the avenue and

not ride to the door. Without a word Goring struck Black Crow to a trot and then to a canter.

"Round here," cried Cynthia, as they reached the corner.

He took no heed. Past the lane they sped, and Black Crow quickened in response to the spur. Cynthia pulled vigorously at Goring's arm, nearly dislodging herself in the effort.

"Stop, stop, Colonel Goring. We are out of our direction."

With a back-hand thrust he pushed her from him but he did not turn his head. A light from a farmhouse flickered between the trees on the left. They were already past Kearsney and on the high road.

Goring's cleverness and boldness and strength had always been a nightmare, and she clung to the pillion. But after the shock had passed her courage came surging back and when a mile from Lydden in the middle of bleak country, Goring halted Black Crow and dismounted, he had confronting him a fiery and scornful maid.

"At last, sir."

"My explanation——"

"'Tis time."

He went on quietly as if she had not spoken.

"My explanation will take a minute or two. I ask your patience, Mistress Wilford."

"'Tis near the snapping point."

If Cynthia had been well read in men she would have found peril in his tolerance.

"We are on our way to York, not to Waveney Manor, Mistress Wilford."

"York!"

"To your father."

"You are a wicked man. You are deceiving me."

Cynthia was spluttering in rage and amazement. Goring gave her rein.

"You have taken me from my friends by force and trickery. I am going home at once. What would Master Porter say?"

"I have no fear of what anyone will say. Sir Thomas Wilford will approve me."

"You know him little."

"I have here in my breast a letter written by your father's authority requiring you without delay to make for York. He names an escort. I take leave to replace him."

"What do you mean?"

And even as with failing heart she asked the question, she knew the answer.

"The road to Waveney Manor has been guarded by my servants all this day. At noon they stopped a messenger and took this letter from him. Nay, hold. Contain yourself. 'Twas on your behalf I acted."

"How, sir, on my behalf?"

"The bugle rang out vainly; did you hear the bugle?"

Cynthia tried to steady herself.

"I know not of what you speak."

"Herrill must think me a fool. Was I like to rest knowing him in Canterbury at such a time? By midday yesterday I had the plan, at least the major part of it. I admitted Nicholas, and Nicholas alone, to my knowledge. He is of stable mind and close-shut mouth. The jewels, the best of them, were changed to the King's coach, though it meant the dislodgment of the Duchess of Richmond from her seat. The others went in the servants' coach ahead. Nor was that all. I stirred among our friends of the neighbourhood. I hinted at a violent

capture of the King's person. When we had mounted the hill from Canterbury there formed up behind the last coach twenty gentlemen of Kent under Sir William Boteler ready to deal fittingly with that murder gang."

"You are the devil," she gasped.

"No, no, only your humble servant. You are best away, Mistress Wilford. Conceive your position in the royal suite when Herrill is seized."

"Is he at Waveney?" she panted out.

"If so, he knows by now his fate depends upon my whim, my whim, nothing more. Meantime, I take you to your father. Could a lover do more?"

"Lover!"

"I fancy Sir Thomas Wilford will show no great discomposure."

"He will kill you."

"What of his feelings when he hears of Herrill's plot, of how you were certain to be ensnared? Before this journey of several days is over, you will know me better."

"What then, sir?"

"What would you? I beg your father's permission to sue for your hand in marriage."

"Marriage! What of your wife?"

"Pooh; these years have we quarrelled. 'Twill be as much relief for her as me. 'Twas a marriage made in hell—too long maintained."

"Your changing affections are famous, Colonel Goring. I am not honoured."

"Listen, Cynthia, the picture of you in days and nights has lifted me up and given me happiness. In times of fighting and of stress there have been waking hours when I have had no thought of you; those hours have been few. I have, forgive me, known women more beautiful, yet the sight of you to me is like a strain

of music. When I am with you, though you may not know it, I get near to losing charge of myself. Your voice to me says more than words can ever utter. You are part of me for always, if I should never see you again. I would have you like me, to do more if that is possible but I cannot lose you. In this quest for you other ambitions seem small. The matter is beyond my choice and I do not wish it otherwise. It is true I have made compounding with Nicholas about my present absence, but I would run away from the King, I would be traitor to-morrow if it would ensure me your possession. I tell you my feelings plainly, Cynthia, so that you may understand what follows."

"It is a long speech, sir. In reply I can but say I mislike you and mistrust you."

"I build on a sure foundation if poets speak truth."

"Do you intend to prevent me from going to my home at Waveney?"

"I regret to assert the need."

"I see difficulties for you in a journey to York."

"They have been thought over and provision has been made. First there is Jasper Herrill!"

"What would you do?"

"If you slip through my fingers, why should I spare him when it would give me great pleasure to see him hanged?"

"I did not know there could be such men as you."

"Learn then the worst, since you constrain me. I will give you every comfort that I can on our journey north. We will stop at the best inns. You suffer the pillion to Canterbury only, for there I obtain horses. All the way I will try to secure your well-being, and you will have but to speak your wants. But I shall not allow you to get away from me."

"You will sleep outside my bedroom door of nights?"

"I have servants at Canterbury; they come with us."

Cynthia pondered.

"Since you hold me prisoner, sir, I have no choice.'

"My bonds on you are light to those you have placed on me."

He swung himself into the saddle.

"Go slow, I beg of you. I am tired."

It was her first sign of failing strength.

"Black Crow will be thankful for the word," he said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I WILL WAIT FOR YOU AT WAVENEY"

GORING set the horse to a walk and only here and there, where the road was firm and level, did he encourage a gentle trot. He threw a look sometimes to see that Cynthia was comfortable, but she asked no further favours.

Goring had one reputation as a soldier and he had another which had come to Cynthia's ears. Twice had he been in duels; twice had he killed his man, in each case the husband of a woman. His phrases on the sex were currency among the dissolute. She had heard it said that no woman, however she might recoil from him at first, could resist him for more than a day or two. Ladies at Court with daughters to think of left as little as possible to chance.

This was the man who doomed her to lonely travel with him through the length of England, who would have her eat her meals with him, stay each night with him in an inn and for protection, forsooth, his own men servants. He might indeed be kind in his way, apart from prisoning her, might keep his length, might for these few days play the courteous knight. Sir Thomas Wilford and Herrill would give her credence, and no other soul in England. A young girl alone with Goring, his companion on the road by day, his fellow guest at country hostelries by night, and still untarnished? She could see the smiles, hear the whispers. Compulsion indeed! Was Cynthia Wilford then so tractable? Doubt-

less some protestations, no more than a shield of straw (and meant to be) against a man of such endearing violence.

And Cynthia reasoning thus saw the refuge to which he meant to drive her. The honour of Sir Thomas Wilford no less than her own was to his hand.

Cynthia was country bred, tough in fibre despite her light moulding. She had been her father's outdoor companion from childhood, and in Dover Bay he had taught her to swim and to sail a boat, and on the chalk hills she had ridden with him in the hunt like any man. At the May Day foot races she had, at fifteen, out-distanced boys of her age. She had been able to ride almost from the time she could walk; her last serious chiding from Wilford was when he found her at risk of her neck astride of a colt broken but the month before.

Cynthia built on her agility, her endurance; Goring did not know how lithe she was. Her own world was around her. The February countryside, bleak and forbidding to the stranger, was part of home, giving her pledges of security. She drew strength from the muttering trees, the hedges with their mystery, the ricks of fragrant clover, the mumbling runlets, the fields with darkness on them sending forth the smell of good brown soil. Here were friends with friendly help.

The rain had ceased and the stars were struggling through when they passed by Wollage, where the woods began to thicken with hazel undergrowth, fringing the highway on each side. A mile ahead were the Barham cross roads, and Cynthia remembered how one autumn her father had dismounted with her there and helped to gather a supply of nuts in the shady thickets. Her nerves tautened as she recalled their search for an opening through the hedge.

The road was heavy, Black Crow was at a walk, and the cross roads were a hundred yards in front when Cynthia made a little movement and caused Goring to turn his head.

" The pillion is hard," she said; " I am galled."

As he pulled up the horse Cynthia had her feet loose, her hands on the pommel like a lever. The moment was at hand for her effort.

Black Crow came to a standstill, and in a flash she leapt. She landed in mud, dragged herself free, was across six feet of wet grass and into the wood by the time Goring had his boot from the stirrup. Then he was almost as quick as she had been, and three strides took him into the undergrowth.

" Cynthia," he called; " Cynthia."

The twigs made darkness complete within a yard or so; the swish of the hazel shoots and the rustle of dead leaves ceased.

" Cynthia, come back. This prank is dangerous."

For answer he had the low " hoo-hoo " of an owl a quarter of a mile away.

" Presume not on my patience, Cynthia. Fail me now, and—— Come out at once! "

Cowering behind a holly bush she heard every word; she knew that her flight would leave no room for mercy in him. The reserve which might have been maintained under her submission had been flung away.

Stealthily she moved at first, without a sound, and then a dead stick snapped beneath her feet and instantly he was after her, impatiently breaking the small branches which smote him in the face. No longer did Cynthia hesitate. Body bent almost double she darted forward, heedless of noise, mining her way through tunnels of the hazel, running upright across clearances, through

breast-high bracken. By the trunk of a fallen oak she halted for sounds of her pursuer. Nothing came to her but faint night whimpers. Barham woods made no place for a chase at night by a man with great hat, and wide-topped boots. At the end of five motionless minutes she sought an open space where there was a sight of the stars.

Cynthia had entered the wood on the left, and she designed to cross the highway and on the other side, under cover, unravel her direction to Womenswold, from whence she would circle south towards Dover. The main road was full of hazard, for she understood Goring too well to believe he would ride off in defeat.

Able now to pick her path, Cynthia threaded a line to the east and was surprised to find how much ground she had covered. Almost was she convinced that in error she had missed her direction, when the bank which edged the road showed black in front of her. A few steps brought her to a break in the bushes which surmounted it, a break just large enough. Impossible was it for her to tell exactly where she might find entry on the other side; for that she must depend on fortune. Dropping from the bank on to the strip of grass she sprang into the road. She was almost across when there was a shout from fifty yards away, and in that shout she knew that ruin was upon her.

"The rabbit will bolt within the hour," Goring had told himself, and had slowly paced to and fro along the wet grass, leading Black Crow by the bridle At intervals he made a stand to listen. That his quarry broke cover near one of his stoppages he probably regarded as a reward due to the careful campaigner.

He mounted, while Cynthia in frenzy sought a break in the hedge in front of her. To return and try to

make a laboured climb through the hole from which she had just come would mean the grip of those strong and wicked hands upon her.

She heard Black Crow begin to move, heard the whistle of Goring's riding whip. Like a deer she sprang away down the road. Black Crow was a heavy horse, not too fresh, and there were soft ruts in the road. For a hundred yards, two hundred yards, she might hold her own, but that would be the end.

She ran as she had never run in those foot races on May Day. The springiness of muscle, the lung power, the nervous force, all the reserves of her healthy young life out of doors—she called on them. For some moments she gained over the horse. Goring was swearing, whether at Black Crow or herself she could not tell.

She kept to the left, filled with a rending anxiety to find a way into the coppice. Would there never be a gap? The noise of the hoofs grew louder, she knew Goring was thundering down on her; her heart was giving great pumps. And then immediately in front the coppice hedge bent back in a curve with a pond in front of it and behind the pond on the bank she saw a cluster of alder by the side of some leggy gorse; between them she might perhaps squeeze.

Through the ooze into the water she plunged; midway it was to her knees, and she had to pull her feet from the sticky bottom. Her hold was on the alder and she was well up the bank before Goring had thrown himself from his horse at the edge of the pond. With body hugging the bank, Cynthia crept, pushed, and fought her passage. Our sheep dog, Jim, would have found it difficult. And yet when Goring, his big boots full of cold water, had heaved himself up on to the bank, to find a palisade as hindering as any devised in war,

she was through, was scurrying straight ahead beneath the encircling growth.

Her cloak and hood were gone; her wet stockings were torn and full of the gorse prickles; her arms and her face were marked by scratches. But she was safe. The precious darkness of the wood had closed around her and on every side was the protecting army of hazel.

On a carpet of soggy leaves she lay to restore herself, within sound of Goring splashing back through the water. She heard the clinking of bit and bridle as he went to his horse.

"I will wait for you at Waveney."

The words chilled her in the midst of her thankfulness. He meant her to know that he was still in possession. If he should go to Waveney——! She put the thought from her as she raised herself up from the damp leaves.

With her back to the high-way she headed for the village of Womenswold, a mile to the east. The night was bright overhead but the undergrowth was gloomy; where a stretch of wiry grass allowed upright walking the trees of beech and oak helped to spread a curtain over her path.

So recent was her escape from terror, so new her recovery from physical distress, that she could not yet map out the future hours. No loneliness was there for her in this wintry wood; the rustling of the topmost twigs was a whisper of acquaintance, and when a spray whipped her in the face it was friendliness. The acrid smell of the leaves underfoot came up to her with memories of childhood in the park at Waveney.

The little night noises were all familiar; the occasional scuttle of a rabbit, the flutter of disturbed sparrows, the soft whistle of widgeon high overhead, and from the leaves and grass and roots that ever-changing twitter, sign

of the woodland's prevailing life, was a reassuring chorus. She was in an underworld but it was an underworld with many soothing messages.

For an hour she pushed slowly ahead, and then the trees began to stand free from the bushes, and she mounted a gradual slope to find that on the other side the hazel thinned away and lost itself in a meadow. The clear country was in front of her. Far away on her left, skirting the wood, was the lane leading from the cross-roads to Womenswold, and a smudge, down in the valley before her, was Womenswold itself. She set off briskly across the frosty grass.

The darkness of the village showed how the hours had sped, and Cynthia, with quietened nerves, seated herself on a stile and considered her course. Dover was ten miles away in a direct line, and to reach it through by-roads, many of them unknown, would add half as much again. She realized the likelihood of an all-night tramp, but she would be in safe and happy haven by day-break.

The thought that Goring might waylay her was too appalling to be considered; his threat was probably but the outburst of a disappointed man. He would not dare, she told herself. But she had to fight against a coldness round her heart at the chance that Herrill should be absent from Waveney. To secure her then on some pretext would be a small matter for such a man as Goring.

She called up her courage, assured herself that for the second time since morning she was but fighting shadows, and descending from the stile walked on to the hamlet. She intended to make for Nonington, where she might be able to rouse the inn and get a horse, and save herself the hours of weariness and struggle which otherwise must be hers.

Cynthia found Womenswold fast asleep. The glimmer

of a lanthorn in a stable, telling perhaps of a mare and foal, would have drawn her from her path had she not remembered how close she was to the Barham cross-roads. Goring might be searching, might for aught she knew be in that very stable. She pushed on through the scattered cottages and out to the open country with fields on each side of her.

The strain of the day began to press upon Cynthia now that her fears were removed. She recalled that she had eaten no food since noon, and hunger brought with it a new fatigue. She had covered two miles of the three to Nonington when she lifted a wattle from a gateway, overturned it on the frosty grass and dropped for a rest. And while she sat there with knees clasped in her hands, trying to look beyond her present plight to the early and sure protection of Herrill, she heard the sound of hoof-beats; a horseman was coming from Womenswold.

She entered the field and crouched behind a clump of brambles behind the gate, and as she peeped through, and listened to that heavy trot she wondered if the trials of the day had disordered her mind. Was this some horrid part of a dream?

Near distraught, her arm pressed against the brambles, as Goring came abreast. He stopped his horse and bent over searchingly, and then he laughed. Cynthia, like a maddened thing, jumped out on to the ploughed field, and ran down the furrow as a hare runs from the dogs, with no plan, only an utter fear and with a bursting heart. He could catch her with his horse across the open ground; she knew, too, that she would run, run, run, though presently she must drop.

Goring made no move; he sat on his horse and looked at the fleeing figure. Then his laugh rang out again, and he touched Black Crow with spur and rode on to-

wards Nonington. Cynthia, half-fainting, dropped her length on the hardened plough-land.

When she recovered herself, shivering with the cold, she was without any aim. Instinct caused her to avoid the roads, to keep to the fields, to strike eastward rather than to the south.

"I will wait for you at Waveney." He would indeed. She dragged herself on across fields, over ditches, through a little wood, fell headlong once in some slippery clover ley. Possibly her life was saved by a straw rick partially cut for litter at a lonely farm. She staggered to the comfortable right-angle of the cut and, burrowing like some animal, found shelter and warmth, and for an hour or so she dozed.

While Cynthia was going through the sufferings of that night I was sleeping soundly. Who would not sleep soundly after so full a day? I woke, however, at my usual hour and I went downstairs before six o'clock to find a big fire in the kitchen and my mother and Lizzie Barton preparing breakfast. This was baking day, and my mother used to say an early start at baking, as at butter-making was half the business. Joan, with milking stool, bucket and lanthorn, had gone out to the cow shed; in winter our cows were always brought in at night to the bedded yard which gave them comfort, and us convenience for the milking in the morning. One by one Joan would call them to the shed; I could hear her clear voice as I stepped outside into the star-studded morning.

Yesterday's rain and wind had given place to a hard frost, and I was glad I had put on my moleskin vest and over it the heavy sheepskin coat. Joan used to laugh at me in the winter because she said big men were more tender to the cold than small ones, perhaps because they had more surface. I turned round by the brew-house and

with the events of the previous day humming in my mind went down the lane to the road. We had had no sign of pursuit by Herrill or any of his men, and I wondered if it were yet too late. As I walked along I plumbed their disappointment.

I was by the bend where on one side split rails take the place of a quickset hedge when, twenty yards ahead of me, I saw someone coming up the lane, very slowly, very painfully, with one hand on the topmost rail of the fence. I ran forward to meet a bedraggled girl. Bare-headed, her wavy hair was about her ears and shoulders, and the sleeves of her bodice were torn and her kirtle was ripped knee high. Mud to the ankle hid her shoes. She stopped, still holding to the fence as I came up.

"He ran after me." Her voice dwindled away.

"Who did?" I spluttered.

"On a big horse."

Her hold on the fence relaxed and she sank into the track. I knelt by her side and lifted her. She was not quite unconscious and her hands gripped my clothing tightly, and I found she was shaking with the cold. I placed her on the ground again, tore off my sheepskin coat and moleskin vest, and wrapped them round her, covering all but her face from sight. Then I raised her in my arms—a piece of thistledown—and strode towards the house. She nestled as a baby nestles and closed her eyes.

I pushed the kitchen door open with my foot, and broke the latch in doing it. My mother turned from the open door of the big oven.

"What——"

"She's near gone," I said as I took the girl to the fire and partially unwrapped her.

"The poor waif."

My mother asked no more questions and took command.

"Lizzie, the usquebaugh."

While we were rubbing wrists and forehead with the spirit, my mother was giving sharp orders to the excited Lizzie.

"A good fire in the best bedroom, quickly. Two warming pans in the bed. Give me the girl, Geoffrey. She's coming to. Go to the cow-shed with the pitcher and get a quart of milk. Tell Joan I want her."

When Joan came my mother said, "Carry her up and put her on the bed, Geoffrey. You, Joan, bring up the large kettle with the hot water."

They turned me from the room, and with the idea that she might have been followed I went out to the lane in my shirt and did not even know there was frost in the air.

Half-an-hour later Joan came downstairs to me in the kitchen.

"We have taken her clothes off and bathed her with hot water. Mother has made her swallow a pint of the warm milk. She's tucked up comfortably in bed in one of my nightgowns. She'll be asleep soon. Who is she, Geoffrey?"

"Cynthia Wilford," I said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CYNTHIA AT SPLICING OAKS

ALL that day while Will was on a mission to Waveney, Cynthia slept like a child, and she was still asleep at six o'clock in the evening when Will returned with his tidings. Herrill had not been seen, and there was no word from him. Tabitha, an old dame with strong opinions, had heard with but little surprise that Cynthia had run away from that pack of rich London people. They were a plaguey lot, all of them, especially the women, she had heard Sir Thomas say so, and Cynthia was that mettlesome, the wonder was she abided them even for a few days. A pity Sir Thomas was not at Waveney, for then the lass could have been secure at her own home, instead of having to run off and hide herself with Mistress Neame at Splicing Oaks, a good woman by all accounts, though overweening about her pippin jelly. Cynthia might rest easy. If those be-satined court people should come bothering with questions they would be steered away to Folkestone or Lympne, or maybe to Rye, with as many untruths as they could be stuffed with. Could Will take a package of clothes for Cynthia? Sorely needed they must be. And a bottle of raspberry cordial for Mistress Neame with her respects. Love to darling Cynthia, and if it were not for the weight of seventy years, Tabitha would be trapesing across country to see her. She begged Mistress Neame to be sure that Cynthia kept dry footwear; she was careless in this matter.

Cynthia woke about supper time and, under the ministrations of mother and Joan, came down to the

kitchen, dressed in some of Joan's things. Joan put her in the settle and propped her up with cushions, and mother mixed her a drink in which there was honey and cream and elderberry wine.

" I have been a great trouble to you all," she said, and Joan replied:

" We are very glad you came here."

" Drink a little more," said mother.

" If I could stay to-night, perhaps to-morrow——"

" My dear," protested mother.

" You will stay several nights with us," said Joan,—Joan who a week or two before had been so severe. " We have news."

" Of Master Herrill? "

Cynthia was eager enough now.

" Not yet of Master Herrill," said Joan, " but Tabitha knows you are here. Will Dyson has been to Waveney to-day."

Cynthia had no need to tell of her pleasure and relief, and her eyes came speeding over to me in father's chair on the other side of the fire.

" You sent him? "

" We'll have Will in," I said.

Will told his story while Cynthia leaned forward; her contour was like a piece of dainty carving as she waited for the least syllable about the man she loved. A sigh came from her.

" What happened at Patrixbourne has changed his plans," I said. " We shall certainly see him very soon." Then I blundered out, " You ought to know 'twas I who spoilt Master Herrill's design."

" You! "

I presented my tale, not sparing my own calculated falseness to Herrill. I was at some disadvantage, for I

had not the hardihood to tell outright of my thought for her and her alone.

Joan has often told me I know nothing about women, nor ever will to the end of my days, and that must be the reason I was astonished at Cynthia's first words.

" It was a great blessing. I came alive again when we had passed Patrixbourne. Only I am anxious about Master Herrill. New danger is around him; his plan was known."

" Known! "

" To Colonel Goring."

I pulled my chair closer as Cynthia told of her experiences. She held us in a silence interrupted only by the crackling of the logs, and when she had finished my mother drew a heavy breath and said, " Thank God you are here."

" I just dragged myself along. I couldn't go much further. I felt I should be safe with you."

" Geoffrey will see to that," said mother, and Joan went over and put her arm round Cynthia's shoulders.

Next morning when I got down, mother was clearing away some of the breakfast things.

" Mistress Wilford? " I asked.

" She slept well; little the matter now beyond scratches and a few bruises."

I am not one of those men in whom curiosity destroys an appetite. I helped myself to half-a-pound or so of the cold fat bacon, broke off part of a loaf, pulled the platter of butter towards me, and took a long draught from the pitcher of milk by my side. When I had finished up with a quart of ale I felt fit to meet the new discoveries of the morning.

I picked up my hat and walked out into the rimy morning, and heard sounds of laughter from the dairy.

Pushing open the door I found Joan giving lessons to Cynthia, who had a skimmer in her hands, and yesterday's cream dripping from her dress.

"Can you skim this pan, Master Neame?"

"Joan's the one for that," I said.

"I'd love to be able to do it."

She pointed to the drops which bespattered the red bricks.

"You must learn to hold the skimmer flat," said Joan, showing the way as she spoke. "Bend it slightly, insert the edge where the cream joins the side of the pan, keep it perfectly steady, and move it under the cream across, without dipping into the milk beneath. It must all be done in one action and smoothly. When you lift the skimmer up a few drops of milk trickle from the holes underneath, and you put the cream in the crock without dropping any."

"Simple enough," said Cynthia, "but impossible for me."

Another try she made, this time with more success, and then, skimmer in her hand, she turned to me and said, "Do you think we shall have news to-day?"

"By to-morrow, or the next day at any rate. Very likely our first visitor will be Master Herrill himself."

I went about my work in the next few days with delicate and tremulous imaginings, turning my eyes from the drab reality which must be their sequel. These were days to be for ever in my memory, the sweetest days that I could ever hope for. I drank deep of their joy. Withal, I schooled myself.

If I was transfigured by her presence, Cynthia herself was another person from that aloof girl at Canterbury. Dainty she remained, but a cloak had dropped from her. She took the comforting, hospitable words of mother and

Joan at their value, and without any reservation. Many an hour she forgot her anxieties in the company of Joan at work, and I caught her more than once, as in the dairy, eager in pursuit of our farmhouse ways.

"How much I don't know," she said woefully at supper on the third day.

"Oh, come," said Joan. "You can teach us a hundred things."

"They amount to nothing. You are even better at embroidery, and at that I have had lessons. I cannot take eggs from beneath a sitting hen without getting my hand pecked. To learn to milk a cow is far harder than to learn the courante dance; I tried it to-day. Mistress Neame can make nine different essences; it would take me weeks to understand one of them."

But all the same, Cynthia brought us glimpses and new knowledge of a wider world. Mother and Joan sat in fascinated silence, needlework neglected on their laps, as she told about her visits to London with her father, described the King and Queen and the little Princess, related stories about Lord Arundel, Lord Dorset and other courtiers. She taught Joan the card game of primero. After that the latter, ever romantic, begging for other hints of court life, received instructions as to the correct method of entering and leaving a withdrawing room, how to make a curtsey to royalty, how to address nobles on presentation to them. One night she dressed my mother's lovely hair in the fashion which had come from the French court, and while Joan rippled and mother blushed, it was Cynthia who said: "No need to go further for a Queen."

On the fourth morning of Cynthia's stay with us, I was splitting some posts and rails in the small barn when she came in, warmly wrapped in cloak and hood, and

seated herself on a heap of oat straw to watch me. From long usage I did my task accurately enough, but without conscious thought and without fatigue, and when I stopped under the pretence of needing rest, it was really for the opportunity of looking at her as she sat bunched up with her chin in her hands. I was promptly examined as to the precision with which the thickness of a rail was maintained by a heavy axe. She seemed to think the process complicated. Everyone on a farm knows it is the simplest thing in the world. She looked as if she were engrossed while I explained, and then she said swiftly:

"Master Neame, why do you never ask me any questions?"

"Questions?"

"About myself, I mean. Are you not anxious on some matters?"

"Naught that should engage me."

"No," she said thoughtfully. Then she went on:

"What has been your greatest happiness in life? What do you look for? I have wondered about you. Does ambition never touch you?"

"I think not."

"Yet you are a man of purpose. In these times you could hold your own with many in high places——"

"Would you try to stir me?" I said, smiling.

"No, no." The disclaimer came very seriously. "You are not a common farmer."

I pulled the splitting block nearer to her and sat down with the axe handle between my knees.

"My father used to preach to me along your lines; he had aspirations. I was to carve a position —to come back presently a gentleman. I was to begin at Trinity College, Cambridge, and from there

the door was open to wider fields than a Neame had ever known. The headmaster at the King's School, my father's friend, sought to inspire me also. I was taught to see beyond the farmyard gates. And for a boy I was not blind. In between the dreary memory work of many books there trickled to me some understanding of the men who had done things in the world, soldiers, priests, patriots. I had a sight of their satisfactions—denied to common folk."

"The encounter with Master Herrill——"

"It broke my course, but had I been strongly set, ways would have been found. I was grieved for my father's sake. He wished me to go to Cambridge. I fear I made to myself the excuse of happiness at homecoming. He was glad to see me happy on the farm. Perhaps it caused some of his desires to leave him. And here I am in truth a common farmer."

Cynthia studied me in silence.

"A grain or two of philosophy may have found early root in me. Or perhaps it was just something in my blood. I was able to conceive the life of action, of success. Some influence could have been found to help me. I even threw a glance at Parliament—I, just a boy. And all the time regret was in me, the regret of every boy who has to think of leaving such a home as mine. Was I never again to join in picking the early apples, to help with the hay, to carry out the beer to the men in harvest-time?"

She was looking at me with bright but immovable eyes and I met her gaze. Her lips were parted. And suddenly, as we sat there facing each other, I was in one of the great moments of life. When she spoke, her voice came to me from a distance, and I had to pull my wits into order.

"Yes, it is quite real to me, Master Neame."

Any kind of further word was beyond me. I got up and made believe to shuffle my splitting block back for work. I was reaching for my axe when she said:

"None of you have questioned me. I have been unquiet because I know questions must be in your mind."

"What kind of questions, Mistress Wilford?"

"Nay, sir, you know full well. I have told you of my home at Waveney Manor, of how my mother died when I was a tiny child, and how Tabitha reared me, of my father's care and kindness, and how from twelve years old I have been about with him a great deal, at times visiting London."

"Yes."

"And out of your kindness you have none of you shown your wonderment as to why I am nearly eighteen, unmarried yet affianced to a man so much older,—one, moreover, who has evil things said against him."

"It is none of our business."

"I want your mother and Joan and you to know something, though perhaps I cannot tell it. You are the best people I have met in all my life. I wish you to know, for I am to come here again. Your mother said I was to come here again."

"Of course you are."

Cynthia did not speak for a minute, and then she said:

"Most girls marry at fifteen."

"Not quite so early in the country."

"Yes, that is because we—some—are bought and sold. Did you know we were bought and sold? A child and a marriage settlement,—she dutifully takes her chance. It is weird that some of those children actually come to love their husbands."

"I have heard of marriages for love among the gentry."

"Rarely, rarely. Love among unmarried young men and women is mostly spoken of as something disgraceful. Master Neame, I have not been bought and sold."

I bowed.

"I have a secret but I ought not to tell it without the consent of either Master Herrill or my father. Yet you ought to know."

"Does it touch your safety?"

"No, but I am under some pretence to you and it irks me."

"In a day or two you will be seeing Master Herrill."

"You will think better of me then," she exclaimed eagerly. "Tell me, do you believe in love the poets write on, love between man and maid?"

"Yes, but I think it comes to very few."

She pondered for a while.

"If a girl knows in her heart a man to be wholly generous and brave and tender, if she knows she can never meet another so quick to understand, so wise and so strong,—if something tells her this, is she in love?"

"She may be."

"May be?"

"Love is like a birth or a death,—it cannot be reasoned about."

"You have been in love?"

"I have the farm and my mother and sister. I am happy."

"You have been in love?" persisted Cynthia. "Who ——"

She stopped, appalled at her own directness.

"Master Neame, I must tell you my secret."

"Better wait till you see Master Herrill."

With determination this time I seized my axe and got to work. She dropped her chin into her hands again.

I had just finished the splitting of a rail when Ned Tulks appeared at the open door of the barn.

"Man outside in the road wants to see you, Master Geoffrey. Got a heifer with him."

"A stranger?"

"Aye: wants to sell the heifer, I reckon."

Cynthia and I went outside to await the visitor, and I told her of how my father used to help his poorer neighbours, some said to spoil them. The visitor plodded his way up the lane, heavy-footed and bow-legged, with a rope round the horns of a yearling heifer as thin as himself.

"Be you Geoffrey Neame?" he asked, as he came near. And he touched his forelock as though to make up for incivility.

"Yes, I am Geoffrey Neame."

"He told me to ask first. He said you were a girt 'un. I got something for you."

He lifted his smock, felt in some recess of his clothes, and brought out a letter tied with rough string.

"He had a piece of paper with him."

As I opened the letter the man went on:

"I got him a quill. I mixed up some mud and water for him to write with."

I made out the missive with difficulty for mud and water are a poor substitute for ink. Here is what I read:

> "I hear Cynthia is at Splicing Oaks. Keep her there. I am at this herdsman's hut with a sprained ankle. My horse slipped coming down hill that night among some tree stumps. Give the man a guinea. I

told him to bring his heifer in case anyone was on the watch. Beware Goring. Don't let Cynthia leave.

" J.H."

I handed the letter to Cynthia and turned to the man.

" Where do you live? "

" In woods this side Sibertswold. I got two cows. He crawled in one night, near dead he was. I went to Waveney for him, to see the old woman. I walked from Sibertswold to-day."

Cynthia was at me now, full of excitement.

" I must go, I must go at once."

" What is your name? " I said to the herdsman.

" Judson, Daniel Judson. He said you'd give me a guinea."

" Tie your heifer up here. Ned Tulks, get an armful of clover hay and a bucket of water. Judson, you come along with me to the house."

Cynthia pelted the herdsman with questions, and by the time we reached the kitchen she was in a ferment of arrangements. I got the man some cold bacon and beer, and then took Joan and Cynthia into the parlour.

Joan heard the man's tale with whitening face, and I noticed it because she was usually the most practical woman in any kind of upset. Her first words were to Cynthia.

" Have you ever nursed a sick person? "

Cynthia ruefully asked if that mattered.

" I must go," said Joan.

" I can come too? "

" If you wish, child."

" A word on that," I said. " Goring assuredly has his eye on Splicing Oaks, at least by proxy."

" And that means? " asked Cynthia.

" You should stay at the farm, as Master Herrill says."

She was braver than I thought; she held on to Joan for a moment or two, and hid her face, and then she said:

" I will do as you think best, Master Neame."

Less than an hour was sufficient for preparations. I decided Will Dyson should go with Joan, gave him word of it, and then had some talk with Judson.

" There's your guinea," I said, " and another guinea will be waiting every week this man rests with you, provided you can keep your mouth shut."

" I reckon."

" You must ride back on one of our ponies. My sister and Will Dyson will go with you."

" What about the heifer? "

" I'll keep the heifer and fatten it up for you."

Within the hour Joan, Will Dyson and Judson set forth. Packed in saddlebags was a plenitude of provisions and medicaments, some bandages, a bottle of usquebaugh, needles and thread, and warm clothing. Two folded blankets were strapped across the front of Will's saddle.

Cynthia, mother and I watched them start as they struck across the fields at the back of the orchard to keep away from the main road. They were to use the fields as much as they could, skirting Knowlton and Barfreston. The herdsman calculated they would reach the hut in the woods in something over two hours.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE VISIT OF LORD CRAVEN AND HIS FRIEND

AT mid-afternoon Joan and Will, on their return journey, came trotting along the road from the direction of Nonington, and Joan waved her hand to Cynthia standing at the gate, and Cynthia waved back to her, recognising good news.

"You'll see him in a week," cried Joan as she dismounted. Cynthia clung to her and kissed her and the two girls went up to the house together.

"What's he like?" said I to Will on the way to the stables.

"His foot's bad; he can hardly move, but otherwise he's fair. He says he's on the mend."

"He didn't show wrath?

"Wrath! He hasn't any."

"Hasn't any!"

"I goes in wary-like, and sees him sitting in the corner on a heap of straw and his eyes were bright like a dog's eyes in the dark. 'Come here, soldier of fortune,' he says, and I goes to him with a good ash stick in my hand, ready for chances. He looks me up and down. 'That was a real piece of work, Will,' he says, and I gapes at him. 'But it might have miscarried; you ran it close.' 'You'll have to talk to the master about that,' I says. He nodded his head. 'Oh, aye, I'll talk to the master about it.' Then he tells me he wants some oats for his horse, and would you send him some pens, ink and paper."

"I don't understand him."

"I don't know as I wants to, master."

Joan insisted that a daily visit to the injured man was necessary till he could move about on his feet, and Cynthia prayed that she might go, if not alone, at least in Joan's company.

"Master Herrill was sure you should not leave Splicing Oaks. He will come to you as soon as he can mount his horse, he said. He swears you will be tracked. He says he knows you're safe while at our farm, and not safe for an hour if you should leave it. You'll set him in a fever if you go against his will."

Though Cynthia was much cast down she was to know ere long that Herrill was right in his precautions. Friends or enemies or both had found her whereabouts.

Just before noon while Joan and Will Dyson were away on the third of their visits to Herrill, I was carrying some sacks to the granary when I heard a shout from Sefton, who was on guard by the gate at the end of the lane. Flinging down my load I hurried back past the cart house into the open to see what was amiss. I saw coming up the lane towards the house two horsemen, with Sefton running by their side. Their dress and equipment showed them to be gentlefolk. I strode over the midden to cut them off, and they stopped their horses and waited for me. As I approached I made out the elder of the strangers to be one of the noblemen I had seen in the King's procession.

"Master Neame, I am the Earl of Craven and I have come with Sir Edward Granville from Dover Castle. We are friends of Sir Thomas Wilford."

"I like my visitors announced beforehand," I said roughly. I turned on Sefton.

"What means this?"

"I couldn't stop them. This one——"

"Permit me," said Sir Edward Granville, a young man of smooth speech. "We come to a chained gate with a besmocked guardian in charge. A sturdy fellow. He refuses us till he could fetch your worthy self. My mare, observe her nostrils now, is not accustomed to hearing her master denied by a countryman in a smock. She nickers, retreats a dozen yards, comes on and flies the fastened gate. Heigho for rustic! Could he do less than open for my Lord Craven after that?"

He stroked the neck of his horse, as full of whimsies in his actions as in his words. Craven was smiling at the manner of narration.

"Five feet if an inch," he said.

"Is this true, Sefton?" I asked.

"Came over like a bird. I got out of way."

"Go into the stable and fetch a musket. If any stranger attempts to get in without leave from now on, rest the barrel on the gate and fire at him. One of the shorter muskets will be best."

"'Twill mean killing, master."

"You can give warning unless you are taken suddenly as by this rider."

"I thank you," said Granville with an uplift of his brows.

"Now, my lords, with all respect, your business."

My manner was not to the liking of Lord Craven and his answer had a sharp ring.

"I understand Mistress Wilford is at this farm. Is she constrained, or here of her free will? Perhaps I had better see her."

"Perhaps you had." I turned and led the way to the house.

"A very Downright, with limbs to match his wit," said Granville, careless of my hearing, as they walked

their horses behind me. "Nay, frown not at me, Craven. I prophesy some entertainment."

In front of the house I called Ned Tulks.

"Tell Mistress Neame we have visitors, Lord Craven and Sir Edward Granville. She may like to receive them in the parlour. Inform Mistress Wilford also."

Granville surveyed me with a humorous scrutiny.

"Yes, yes," he said, and fell to whistling a lilting air.

I must say this for him, though, that in the parlour when mother and Cynthia came in, he, like Craven, lacked not respect. They bowed low to my mother as she bade them welcome.

"We have heard of an adventure, Mistress Wilford," said Craven. "I have known your father many years. We have all been anxious, Master Porter in distress. I come to convey you to your friends."

"I do not desire to go to Waveney, Lord Craven."

"It is your home."

"My home, yes."

"Why should you have fled when Goring was taking you thither?"

"He said that!" gasped Cynthia.

"It matters not. You shall come with us to Dover. Thence you can return with Lady Dorset to London. The Queen embarks to-morrow—and all will be glad to see you once more."

"I must make my peace for an escapade—I see your meaning. You are kind to have come here for me, Lord Craven, but you do not understand all that happened. Was no explanation given of my flight?"

"Naught except that Goring said you made a dash from him. He could neither catch you nor find you. A madcap frolic, said some; sheer waywardness. Yesterday came news you were secluded in this farmhouse,

protected or imprisoned, we knew not which. And so as your father's friend and your own you find me here."

"This other gentleman, Sir Edward Granville, is he Colonel Goring's friend? Why is he with you?"

Granville answered for himself.

"I believe I have no real apology for my presence, Mistress Wilford. I hope you will not account it a sin that I—took a ride with Lord Craven."

"I would know if you are Colonel Goring's friend, and if that is why you are here?"

"I have no mission. I am here as an idler. Mistress Wilford's beauty and spirit gave cause for talk in face of her adventure. That her harbour should be Splicing Oaks farm made the news succulent for the gossips."

"And why, sir?"

"'Tis known she is affianced to a Master Herrill. 'Tis known that Splicing Oaks belongs to a young yeoman, famed hereabouts as a giant, reputed an ogre and suspected of intelligence. What a tit-bit! Consider the situation, Mistress Wilford! Refreshment indeed! Did she plan to go to him? Has he captured her by force? Does he hold her against her will? What kind of a man is he? The women at Court are at least as inquisitive as the men. He must be a dreadful person, they say—and all of them I wager anxious for a sight of him. Lord Craven announces this morning that he comes bravely enough on a rescue expedition. I beg permission to be his companion. Idleness sent me and nought else, and I have no excuse. But withal I am entirely at your service, though I cannot guess in what direction.

"Did Colonel Goring take a share in these conjectures?"

"Goring has been dismantled by your flight from him," said Lord Craven. "His conceit is bruised."

"Surprised and sullen are the words," added Granville. "The good Goring—he is no friend of mine—is hurt in temper. To be flouted—fled from——"

"The hour is late," interrupted Craven. "Perhaps Mistress Wilford would like to tell us what she has to tell—if anything—when we reach Dover."

"I do not go to Dover."

"You do not go!"

"I choose to accept an invitation to stay at Splicing Oaks."

Lord Craven looked at her in silence for a second or two.

"I hope you have considered this," he said coldly. "Your friends await you at Dover. The King himself has asked about you. What reasons shall I give? This is no place for Sir Thomas Wilford's daughter. These worthy folk—your hosts——"

"I enlighten you, Lord Craven. I prefer the protection of a farmer and his mother and his sister to that of yourself and others at the Court. Strange! It would have seemed strange to myself a month ago. That I should have come to this farm above all others is even more of a marvel."

Her words quickened.

"My heart is like to break when I think of Mistress Neame and her daughter and Master Neame whom you despise as farming folk. I am not good enough——"

Cynthia's voice left her, and she turned a piteous look at my mother, and Joan was at her side in an effort to draw her to a seat. She recovered herself with Joan's hand in hers.

"I fled in fright and misery, my lords. I was helpless. I fled to a farm—to this farm. I found here safety

and kindness, deepest kindness given to one who should have been spurned, thrust out to the roadway——"

I went over to her side.

"No need, Mistress Wilford——"

She pushed me back.

"Listen, my lords. I have found refuge from you and yours in the home I have despoiled. Only a month or two ago I, with this hand, killed Master John Neame, made Mistress Neame a widow. Unwittingly, God knows. But I, and no other, made empty that chair by the fire. This Master Neame was a good husband and father. I took him away. I come and ask for succour, ask for it and get it in overflowing measure from those I have so injured. You despise them as farming folk!"

In her excitement she could hardly get her words out, and she was trembling. Joan took hold of her arm to calm her.

"I make my apologies to Mistress Neame and her family," said Craven; "I intended no hurt. We will all be grateful for their goodness to you, Mistress Wilford. Some of us knew the story of Master Neame. As you have said it gives edge to our wonderment that you should be at Splicing Oaks."

Then Cynthia began the story of that terrible night. Gaps there were in it—awkward gaps they seemed to me—for she had to leave out aught that would bring danger to Herrill. But even with these omissions the drama was moving enough, strengthened as it was by a knowledge in her hearers of the man's character and record. The horror of those hours came back to Cynthia, were reproduced afresh in us who knew the tale. No longer was Craven restless to be gone; a sombreness had come upon him. Granville took short steps to and fro, blood

showing in his pale face. He snapped an ejaculation now and again.

"And now, you see, my lords, why I am at Splicing Oaks," said Cynthia at the end. Long before this the grave-faced Craven had made up his mind.

"You must forgive my seeming harshness, Mistress Wilford. Poor frightened child."

"Craven"—began Granville, who was standing very rigid, but the older man stopped him.

"This story brings perils for many. We must march carefully—not from any want of feeling, Mistress Wilford. Goring of a certainty is now prepared for disclosure."

"And what of that?" exploded Joan.

Craven inclined his head towards her.

"Mistress, you may not know the country is a-bubbling. Civil war is at our doors. The King, distracted, has his counsellors and generals, and among them are Colonel Goring and Sir Thomas Wilford. We must take high and wide considerations before we act."

"Enough of this," cried Granville; "the lecherous villain. Come what may to-night I promise Mistress Wilford there will be one arm——"

"You'll put the girl in further jeopardy."

"I'll take jeopardy from her," exclaimed the young man.

"We can talk further of the matter on our ride," said Craven.

I took them outside and saw them mounted, noting how different was their manner from that when they entered. I walked with them down to the gate.

"Master Neame," said Granville, "pray alter your instructions. Make it two men—or at least two muskets. Moreover, shoot the horse before you shoot the rider."

I watched them trot off on the Dover Road, and then I walked back heavily to the house. Cynthia, tearful now, was being mothered. She looked up as I came in.

"Did I do wrong, Master Neame?"

"You were very brave. Some time the story had to be told. We must make provision for the consequences."

"Consequences?"

"This visit of Craven and Granville has set spark to Goring's arrangements."

"What can he do?"

"Sir Edward Granville may force him to a duel," said Joan.

"Goring is an unusual man. I fear danger in directions we have not mentioned."

"Master Neame," said Cynthia, "I have brought enough of harm to Splicing Oaks. Find some plan that I may leave. You must not be further imperilled——"

"Why, Mistress Wilford," I sang out in lively fashion, "you are our shield. But for your presence Goring long ere this would have been in force to punish me. Your presence is our safeguard."

I have never lied more glibly.

Cynthia looked at me and shook her head.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE PEDLAR'S VISIT

THAT night after the others were gone to bed, I sat, pipe in mouth, before the fading embers of the kitchen fire, mightily concerned with some unseen things which bore upon the fate of Cynthia, and indeed upon the fate of all at Splicing Oaks. Drama was in being at Dover, perhaps had already reached its climax. There among the courtiers motives were at work which I could not measure. Only I knew that the reckless men were being variously impelled. Nor could I dismiss nearer considerations which must take their place in the issue: I knew that what had come to possess my heart was something to be reckoned with.

What happened on the day following I was to know through Joan, after all had been said and done. It seemed that Cynthia, thinking over the plight of affairs, had come to the opinion that peril for Splicing Oaks was imminent, and might perhaps be averted. She began about the matter to mother and Joan as soon as I had set out for Cooper's Piece to look after the couch fires which were burning there—work which I could do contentedly in the knowledge that I was within sight, almost within hail, of the homestead.

"If I were away," said Cynthia, "there would not be so much risk for Splicing Oaks."

Honest mother had no denial, but she said, "Geoffrey wouldn't think of your leaving us."

" What would you do? " asked Joan in her practical way. " Go back to Dover to Goring? Try to ride to London and be caught by him? Or just go and hide in the woods? "

" Leave it to Geoffrey," said my mother.

" It's Geoffrey I am afraid of."

" Afraid of Geoffrey? "

" You know what kind of man he is."

" He's rough sometimes, but surely you don't believe any hurt would ever come to you——"

My mother was amazed at Cynthia's stupidness, and Cynthia, on her part, had to push back a smile at mother's innocence.

" What rubbish," said Joan.

" I daresay people would think him brutal because he takes a stick to a man sometimes," persisted mother, " but as for you, Cynthia——"

At which Cynthia could not keep in her laughter any longer and mother—poor mother!—thought she was hysterical.

" I know what you have in mind—how he treated you on that terrible day, but you must remember what he suffered."

" Dear Mistress Neame, you misconstrue my thought entirely. I am very earnest when I say I do not think your son is brutal, or even rough."

" Well, then! " said mother.

Joan described Cynthia as being very earnest.

" There are those who do not know him. I would like to tell you, Mistress Neame, that I have found your son always considerate and generous." She hesitated and then she went on quickly. " Harsh and brutal! Mistress Neame, Geoffrey is the gentlest man I have ever met in all my life! "

Joan said that at this point mother and Cynthia were both inclined to make fools of themselves.

It was Cynthia who took up the thread again.

"You know what is going on at Dover. Geoffrey's influence is talked about. He is a figure to be taken notice of in this countryside. He might thus be in some danger, and here am I making it certain."

"Geoffrey is not so important as all that," said Joan.

"He is indeed. If I were at some other farmhouse it would not matter so much. They might come for me, but they would not bring injury to the people of the place."

"He can take care of himself," said mother.

"He will fight them all. I fear for him. I fear for you."

"Geoffrey is a quiet man. Besides he knows his place among the gentry."

For the first time Cynthia contradicted my mother.

"I do not think Geoffrey is a quiet man. As to his place among the gentry, indeed he knows it, but it is not the kind of place you are thinking of. I don't wish a man to bring ruin on himself and his mother and his sister through kindness to a stranger."

And it was within half-an-hour of this that the pedlar came along the road from Eastry, singing one of his ditties. Frequently in the summer time and occasionally in the winter we had a visit from some pedlar or other, tramping round to the various farms with a pack on his back or a maund on his arm. Such travellers were always welcomed by the womenfolk, and Ned Tulks and the boy on guard at the gate had some excuse, perhaps, for letting the man in despite my instructions. He had apparently heard tell of Splicing Oaks and its prospects for such as himself. He sang merrily as he came along:

"There was a maid came out of Kent,
Dainty love, dainty love,
There was a maid came out of Kent,
Dangerous be:
There was a maid came out of Kent,
Fair, proper, small and gent."

He was a thin man with a hooked nose and deep-set eyes: he wore a tattered jerkin, and an old moleskin cap. With a happy smile and toss of his hand by way of greeting he placed his pack upon the ground and threw open the lid, and his cheery chatter caused Sefton to stick his fork in the midden and join the party and brought up Will Dyson from the barn. The pedlar had his hands full of gauds which he thrust towards the women, and they picked and turned them over as he talked.

"I bring beautiful things only to the beautiful, good ladies—ribbons of blue for the golden hair, a sash of silk for the slender waist, bright buckles for the shoon. Naught that I could offer would match the brightness of your eyes, ladies, nor have I damask pouches which could bear contrast with the sheen of your cheeks. But there are charms even for the charming. Look among these and choose for yourselves. Here is a ring with a blue stone: here reels of thread, rosettes, skeins of silk, needles galore, pins for your dresses, and pins for your hair, bodkins of all sizes."

They talked and joked with him, and each made a tiny pile for herself on the cloak which Joan had placed on the ground. While they were picking and choosing, the pedlar turned an eye to Will Dyson and Sefton.

"'Tis the age of learning, good friends. I have horn books here with the A.B.C., or rhymes for the children. Listen to this:

" ' My father he died, I cannot tell how,
But he left me six horses to drive to the plough,
With a wimmy-lo, wommy low!
Wimmy-lo, wommy-lo, wob, wob, wob! '

" Here, sirs, we have a little printed book with botanic medicines for all. Ye should know the nature of herbs and plants, being our fellow-creatures and made for the use of man. Cull the good herbals. They are all here, such as grow by the highway-side, in meadows, by rivers or in marshes or in cornfields or on rocks, walls or in shady places."

" I reckon we can doctor ourselves better nor what you can," said Sefton, and laughed loudly at his own wit.

When the purchases were made each little collection was tied by the pedlar in separate kerchiefs which he artfully enough forced upon them at the last moment. As they took their spoils indoors he went off down the lane to the road, and they heard his voice trolling out:

" There was a maid came out of Kent,
Dainty love, dainty love."

He stopped for a talk with Ned Tulks at the gate and gave him and the boy a fairing.

Five minutes after the pedlar had disappeared along the road to Nonington, Cynthia came out of the house without hood or cloak and ran down the lane to Ned Tulks.

" Is he gone? " she asked.

" Just got over the rise there," said Ned Tulks, pointing the direction with his finger.

" I must catch him," said Cynthia, and she was full of excitement.

" Best stay here and let me go after him."

" No, I'll go myself," and she began to run her hardest along the roadway.

Ned Tulks had a grain of sense; as she turned the bend where the old elms cluster round the pond he strolled after, musket in the crook of his arm; he felt she should not be out of sight, he said, but out of sight she was in a minute or two before he reached the brow of the road. Then he had a view of her by the trees; she was talking to two horsemen who had apparently been in waiting for her; and before Tulks could reach the group she was being helped to the saddle of a spare mount which the men had with them. She gathered up the reins and the three of them made off along the Nonington road. They went from sight at the gallop.

When I saw Ned Tulks half lurching half running towards me across the sticky fields, I went to meet him, for I needed no telling that something was wrong.

" Gone with two men waiting for her in the road."

" Mistress Wilford? "

" Ay."

Before he could say more I had him striding with me towards the house and then I asked, " Could you see if the men were Lord Craven and Sir Edward Granville? "

" Couldn't say, they were on the move."

" Tell Will Dyson I want him. Get the roan from the loose box."

I burst into the kitchen.

" Cynthia's gone," I said.

" Gone! " echoed Joan.

" I'm going after her. Get me my other hat, mother."

Joan trotted by my side as I made for the stables, and

when we reached Ned Tulks at the door she asked him, "Did you not hear those men? 'Twas but a stone's throw."

"Heard horses an hour ago. Thought it was Sefton crossing to the lower meadow with the bush harrow. Couldn't see them from where I was."

"She's never gone on her own account," I said. "She's been lured away."

Will Dyson came across the yard leading the roan by the forelock. Ned Tulks was waiting with the saddle, and I snatched the bridle from the wooden peg on the wall. For once the roan was obstinate and refused to open his mouth for the bit, and I struck him a blow with my clenched fist which caused him to throw up his head with a grunt of pain, and five seconds later I had the bridle on him and fastened. I lifted myself into the saddle and turned to give an order to Will.

"Take the mare and ride as hard as you can to Dover Castle and insist on seeing Lord Craven or Sir Edward Granville or Master Porter. Tell what has happened. Get back here swiftly."

"Which way do you go, master?"

"If I lose track of them I shall make for Herrill at Sibertswold."

I gave the roan a blow, and never thought to say goodbye to Joan.

I overtook the pedlar half a mile ahead. He had halted for a rest with his pack on the grassy entrance to a field gateway, and, with his old moleskin cap in his hand, was leaning against the gate regarding my approach without manifest interest.

"Did the lady overtake you?"

I had begun my question before I reached him.

" She rode past me with two friends just now. Did she seek me? "

From his voice this man had had some education; many of his kind there were, wastrels who, falling on hard times, found tramping, talking, bargaining a congenial way to bread and cheese. While I sat for a moment reflecting how far it would be wise to question him he whipped open the lid of his pack.

" Let me not lose an opportunity. You are a man who reads, who understands. Rarely is your like known in the farms, sir. Here I have little books. I beg you to scan them."

He was all smiles and eagerness, white teeth gleaming.

" Used by scholars, somewhat soiled, a little torn, but still good fruitful seed. Here master, some pages on affability in discourse, giving entertainment in sweet and liberal manner. Cheerful courtesy to season talk at table. Ingenious epigrams, emblems, anagrams, merry tales, witty questions. No? Here, then, an essay on logic helping to discover fallacies, sophisms, and that which the schoolmen call vicious argumentation. Again, no! I——"

" Stop this jargon."

I jumped from my horse and advanced on him.

" What message did you bring to Mistress Wilford? "

He looked at me vacantly, one hand clutching the neck of his frayed jerkin.

" Message? "

He drew himself back a step, and then as I plunged forward he drew from his breast a shining poinard a foot long.

" Touch me not," he called out, his light manner gone. " I'll not have your great hands on me. Shame to you, worthy farmer."

" Who are you? "

" One who can play Jack the Giant Killer, master. Come no nearer."

He had me beaten. Perhaps he had nothing to reveal. I cursed my foolishness, and turned to the roan, which had begun to nuzzle in the winter grass.

" I'll know more of you yet," I said as I mounted.

" You must be distraught to come at a poor pedlar like me."

He replaced the dagger in his breast. I set my horse at a trot, and before I was fifty yards on my way I heard him singing out to himself a snatch from a ballad:

> *" There was a maid came out of Kent,*
> *Dainty love, dainty love,*
> *There was a maid came out of Kent,*
> *Dangerous be."*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SIR EDWARD GRANVILLE RIDES HARD

WAS that wayside rascal in the game? I recalled his readiness of words, his half-mockery, the swiftness with which he brought out his dagger—truly an unusual weapon for a country pedlar. Yet he and his kind were a race apart—sometimes laden with adventures from the past which might seem to consort ill with so humble a calling. I had been angered, and the chance question I fired at him had certainly failed its mark. I might have been to him only the thick-headed bullying farmer. And yet he had sped my parting queerly; I could hear the lilt of it still:

> *"There was a maid came out of Kent,*
> *Dangerous be."*

I pushed the fellow from my mind, and encouraged the roan. I had abandoned the thought of overtaking Cynthia and the two men, who were gone from sight and like enough had branched off by now; they must, without doubt, have made schemes to deceive pursuers.

Herrill was the man to enlist, and as quickly as possible. I cursed the miles which separated us. Herrill was full of capacity, one to match cunning with cunning, a person of expedient, one, moreover, who could not be frightened. Frightened; I knew full well the blazing furnace I should kindle by my story.

I rode into Sibertswold village with the roan sweating hard, pulled up at the ale house to give him a drink of water, and from the old man who held the wooden bucket to his nose received guidance for the finding of Judson's hut. I was to break into the woods on the left just beyond the village, push on beyond a grove of beeches, skirt some hazel and after a while I should come to a pond, beyond which was Judson's wooden dwelling in a clearing.

"Take you half an hour," he said, "you'll have to lead your girt horse through some bits."

In truth I found the crowding undergrowth more hindering than the old man had said, and the best part of an hour had gone before I came in sight of the little thatched shack with its lean-to for the cows. I swept my eye over the broken patch of soil into the surrounding bracken and furze for some sight of Judson, but saw nothing of him. He was probably afield with his cows, and I clattered up to the hut with a cheery shout to tell the man within of a friend's arrival. My heart was high, for in this dare-devil I was vesting my hopes of salvation. Villain, he might be, but in this bad hour he was a tower of strength.

I threw the reins on the roan's neck and jumped down —never a more relieved horse stretched his head forward to blow out a steaming cloud. The door was ajar, and as I pushed it open I called "Herrill! It's Geoffrey Neame; where are you?"

No answer came, and as I stepped into the middle of the room, my eyes not yet accustomed to its shade, I called to him again, to stir him from sleep, perhaps, or to convince him I was friend, not enemy. I listened in vain. Was he so ill? A yet more dreadful thought crept upon me. But as I began to see more clearly I realised

that nobody, living or dead, was in the hut. Heaps of dried fern shewed where the two men had slept, some sheepskins lay on one, the two blankets from Splicing Oaks on the other. I kicked against a little saucepan Joan had brought for cooking, and in a corner I saw the usquebaugh jar and other oddments we had sent from the farm. I put my hand upon the blackened remains of the fire and found they were cold. Then I went out to the shed where his horse was stabled; the horse was gone, and gone too of design, for bridle and saddle were missing.

I walked round the hut and shouted at the top of my voice first for Herrill and then for Judson. Echo from the wood was the only response, and a minute later I called again, despairingly enough now. Then I caught my breath. Pushing his way from a clump of furze on the edge of the bracken, fifty yards from the house, was the figure of Judson. He shuffled across to me, looking to right and left as he came.

"Had to be sure it was you alone, Master Neame. Thought I'd bide there to see if there was any of the others."

"Where's Master Herrill?"

"He went off with them men. I never come near."

"Men? What men?"

In a round-about frightened way he gave me the events of the morning. He had taken his two cows to a new growth of grass half a mile away, leaving Herrill in the hut cleaning his pistols. Returning in about an hour and threading his way through the undergrowth he witnessed doings which brought him to a standstill, very thankful for cover which kept him from view. Herrill had come out limpingly from the cowshed where he had most likely been to give his horse some corn, and when

he was a yard from the door two men appeared from round the corner of the building with pistols pointed at him. They uttered an order which Judson could not distinguish, and Herrill stood still.

Two horses were led up from the shelter of the wood where they had been hidden and Herrill's horse was fetched out, saddled and bridled. He was made to mount and then the three of them, with Herrill ahead, rode on the track to the south, which led to the Dover Road.

" What kind of men were they? "

" Soldiers. Each of them had a sword."

And that was all the description I could get from him. Half-paralysed by fright Judson had discerned no details, had been blind as to whether they wore broad-brimmed hats or headpieces, were in doubtlets or leather jerkins. So far as he described them they might have been gentlefolk from the Court or plain men-at-arms. I wondered if it were possible that they were neither, and then in his scared talk at large Judson gave me a hint.

" Swearing at them he was, I could hear that. They didn't swear back, but kept the pistols pointing at him. Thought they were going to shoot him. I kept low in the furze."

" Could you pick out anything? "

" I could hear Master Herrill swearing; he hollered ' Dover ' at them. He did it once or twice. I reckoned they stopped him. They were all quiet enough when they rode away."

" He took the chance that you might hear the word ' Dover.' "

It was nearly dark by the time I rode up the lane to the house and saw Joan outside in waiting, and she ran towards me.

" Come into the light," she said, taking me by the arm,

and trying to hurry me to the kitchen, where the candles were burning. She thrust into my hand a square of paper with some writing on it. "I went upstairs and found the things Cynthia had bought from the pedlar lying on her bed, and on the top of them this piece of paper."

I read the missive, read it twice. These were the words:

> "J.H. in peril. You alone can save him. A horse awaits you outside. Stay not a minute or you will regret it all your life. A Friend."

"It might even be the truth," I said staring at the paper.

"Why do you say it might be the truth?"

"Because Herrill was captured and carried off early this morning."

Joan put her hands to her face in horror.

"Herrill captured!"

"Taken suddenly—some of the King's men from Dover."

"What are you going to do?" asked Joan, in a low voice, and I had never seen her look so frightened.

"I am going to have something to eat, then I can think."

We had finished supper, a meal broken by my tale of the pedlar and my mother's repeated demands that I "shouldn't go poking my head into trouble again" when a noise of hoofs out by the stable announced that Will was back from Dover.

"We'll have him in here, Joan," said I. "Put some food and drink for him on the table. He can talk while he eats."

But Will Dyson, although always a thorough trencherman, was keen to deliver himself before he sat down at the table. He straddled in front of the fire and rattled away at a great rate.

"I put up the mare at the King's Head with a sieve of corn, and Solomon, the ostler, told me how the King and his party had gone off to London. Some soldiers were left at the castle, he thought, and one or two of the nobles from London. When I said I had a message for one of them he pricks up his ears. 'They'll never let you in unless you got a letter or something,' says he. 'You won't get near.' 'Weren't there any way of seeing one of the servants?' says I, and shows him a shilling. He scratches his head and says a groom from the Castle had his pint of ale at 'The Ship' inn of an afternoon.

"He goes round with me to 'The Ship' and there's the groom, man named Tom Bowls—nephew of old Bowls the sawyer at Ash by all that was lucky. 'I'm from Geoffrey Neame,' I tells him, 'What, girt Geoffrey Neame at Eastry?' 'Aye, I carries a message for one or more of the gentry at the Castle, Lord Craven.'

"'Lord Craven, he's travelling with the King.'

"'Master Porter, then.'

"'He's gone too. Colonel Goring's here and Colonel Lyall. I don't know if Sir Edward Granville has left. He was going to-day.'

"'Sir Edward Granville is the one I want.'

"'I mightn't see him all day.'

"'Send one of the servants to him. I wish I had a piece of writing. If you can get word to him that a message waits from Geoffrey Neame, a guinea is ready for you any time at Splicing Oaks.' I was afear'd, Master."

"Quite right, Will."

"It's a lot of money," murmured mother.

"Go on," said Joan.

"'Sir Edward Granville will give you another,' says I; 'he's waiting for this message.'

"Well, he goes and I hadn't got much hope. Howsoever, I went and waited as I told him I would on the bend of the road at the Castle Hill and I hadn't been there half an hour when down the hill come striding Sir Edward Granville. How Bowls had done it Lord knows, but you owe him a guinea, master."

"Get on," I said.

"'Are you from Master Neame?' says his lordship very sharp and haughty.

"'Just come from Eastry,' says I, respectful like. 'Come to tell you Mistress Wilford has been stolen from Splicing Oaks.'

"'Stolen!'

"I could see he was taken aback. Then I up and told him all about it and he kept sticking in questions and he stamped up and down and used awful words. When I had finished he turned on me as if I was to blame. 'Man, you bring worse news than you think.'

"'Can't help it,' says I.

"He paced about for a minute or two, and then he called me to him.

"'Can you remember a straight sentence or two to take back at once to your master?'

"'I brought his word to you all right.'

"'Yes, you did. Your master trusts you?'

"'Always have done. So did his father.'

"'Did your master know of the attempt on the King's jewels?'

"'King's jewels,' says I, 'what's they?'

"He rubbed his forehead thinking to himself and after a little he said, 'This is what you are to tell. When

we arrived the mischief had been done; Herrill had been denounced to the King as a traitor, Mistress Wilford as a dupe, Master Neame as a dangerous bully from whom she must be rescued. I was persuaded by Lord Craven to silence for the sake of Mistress Wilford. I think I was a fool. A piece of good fortune I didn't leave this morning.'

" ' Colonel Goring? ' says I.

" ' Ah, you know, do you? Well, tell this to Master Neame, the King has given a warrant to Colonel Goring to investigate the charge against Herrill, laid it on Goring to protect Mistress Wilford and return her to her father.'

" ' What will Colonel Goring do? '

" ' He'll hang Herrill if he can get hold of him. Your master won't be safe.'

" ' And Mistress Wilford? '

" ' What was your master doing to let her go. Why didn't he watch her? She was there under his protection. He's a man. Has he no brains? '

" ' He couldn't help——'

" ' We rested on him. She was safe there. Even Goring wouldn't have dared to seize her by force. Now ——'

" ' He's bound to take her to her father.'

" He laughed in a funny rattling way. ' More likely to put her on a ship and take her to France.'

" ' I better get back and tell master.'

" ' Let it be known to Master Neame that Sir Thomas Wilford has returned from the north. I ride to London to-night to fetch him.'

" ' To London! You'll want horses——'

" ' I have a mare worth all the nags on the road. Even so I may be too late. If Goring seizes Herrill before we return——'

" ' It's good-bye, Master Herrill! '

" ' Possibly good-bye to Mistress Wilford too,' says he very serious.

" He passed me on the road," said Will, finishing his tale. " That mare of his was going fast; she's like a greyhound. He was riding her steady, but seemed to go by me like the wind. He gave me a shout as he passed. Before he gets to London the mare will be driven hard. He is ready for anything, that young man. His face was like a ghost."

Joan had clasped her hands tightly together as if in prayer.

" I hope the mare will last," I said.

" Ride on, good lad," said Joan.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE CONSTABLE'S TOWER

IN the dark of the early morning I rode forth from Splicing Oaks, heeding not the south-westerly wind and the slanting rain, filled with a purpose which had slowly found its birth in me after mother and Joan had gone to their beds. I had left a note for them under half a loaf which lay on the kitchen table. A sieve of oats by lantern light had been compensation to the roan for being roused from luxurious straw.

Fatigue as well as worry had dropped from me as I steered my way under a cloud-ridden sky past Heronden and the big windmill towards the juncture of the Dover Road in sleeping Eastry. I was strong in a resolve, not unmindful of its risks but possessed of satisfaction. Behind me were hours of self-reproach, and I was in good fettle again.

Eight was striking on the clock of St. Mary's Church as I entered Dover, and the sun was struggling up behind a rim of watery cloud in the direction of Sandwich. I stabled my horse at the "Crown," and walked along to within the Snar Gate where my mother's cousin, Stephen Brockman, had his tailor's shop. He was surprised in seeing me at so early an hour, and reproved me for not coming to him the night before for lodging. When I told him I had ridden that morning from Eastry he stared at me, and said:

"We'll talk in the parlour."

Stephen Brockman was a wizened man, reputed rich

(though always grateful for the haunch of venison we used to send him at Christmas time), and he was a leading citizen of Dover, being a jurat, and spoken of as a future mayor. Though no Puritan he was with many others strong against the King's party, for heavy imposts had drained away loyalty.

I told him some portion of my story, the while he rubbed his nose thoughtfully, and kept his little squinting eyes fixed on me.

"I cannot see harm coming to Mistress Wilford."

"Goring cares for nothing."

"He won't ruin himself with the King for the sake of a girl. As for that night gallop of his, I'll take oath he can put a good colour on it."

"Mother and Joan are fond of the girl—we all are. I am here to help her. It was through my carelessness she was cozened away from the safety of Splicing Oaks yesterday. She is in double danger. She may escape designs on her by Goring. She will not escape what must seem to her as bad—the loss of her lover. Goring means deadly work by Herrill, means it to-day."

Stephen Brockman folded his arms across his breast.

"Let well be. The girl's safe enough. What can you do at the Castle?"

"I can persuade Goring, argue with him, threaten him, if need be. I'll find a way for delay. Granville may be back with Wilford before the afternoon is gone."

Stephen Brockman spoke very dryly:

"I have always called you a longheaded young man, Geoffrey. You're talking folly. Or are you keeping something back?"

"I came here because I wanted you to learn my purpose."

"I have learned it. I disapprove of it. You're entering deep waters. You'll remember your mother, Geoffrey."

"Yes, yes," I said abruptly. I feared both his shrewdness and his kindness.

"Geoffrey, how do you style yourself, for King or Parliament?"

"Oh, I'm a King's man," said I bitterly. "We Neames have always been King's men. We must have a King."

"In Dover nine out of ten are for the Parliament. Much talk arose out of your father's death. You have many sympathizers."

"I have to do this by myself."

"More's the pity. Here you are in a city full of friends, going out of it up to the Castle which has a handful of your enemies. 'Tis an arrow's flight but we shall be helpless."

He stroked his chin.

"I am wondering if Sir Edward Boys, the Governor, is at the Castle? He inclines to the Parliament. I could find out."

"I should be at the Castle by now; Goring is no laggard."

"Better not to go, Geoffrey."

"I fancy there is strong need of me," I replied, as I put my hand on his shoulder and thanked him.

"No more croaking," he said. "I'll look for you at supper."

As I climbed the hill to the castle the rising south-westerly gale, the cry of the sea-gulls, the harsh rattle of the waves on the beach were no part of the world to me. I was living in the hour ahead, and my heart was cold and warm in turn, and little thrills ran through me, first

cousins to fear, to be chased away by exhilarations which come to a young man before a flight. My course was marked and I could not depart from it.

I strode across the gravelled roadway in front of the Mamignot Tower and tugged at the bell-chain on the left of the great gateway, rehearsing my tale to secure entry, praying for wit to alter it convincingly if need be. I heard footsteps, the clash of bolts and then the studded door was opened a foot or more by a porter.

"I carry an urgent message for Colonel Goring on the King's business."

The man looked at me doubtfully, and I guessed that though my bearing demanded some respect the plainness of my dress was unusual in a royal messenger. It was no time to falter. When he began "Who be——" I interrupted sternly, "Colonel Goring will not thank you for delay."

"Wait here. I'll fetch the gatekeeper."

He shut the door in my face but returned to open it in a minute or so accompanied by a thick-built man wearing a sword by his side, whom I guessed to be the Gentleman Porter, in charge of the several gates.

"Your name?"

"Geoffrey Neame."

"Master Neame of Splicing Oaks Farm?"

"Yes. I have business with Colonel Goring."

He signalled for me to enter, and I was surprised at his civil air.

"I have heard your name spoken here in the last day or two, Master Neame. You come at an awkward moment for audience with Colonel Goring."

He looked at me in friendly enquiry.

"You will guess the tenor of my message."

He nodded understandingly.

" We had Master Herrill brought in yesterday. Mistress Wilford was fetched from Waveney this morning."

" Yes, that was the arrangement," I said as calmly as I could.

" Sir Edward Granville said we might see you here."

" He has been in communication with me. I expect to hear from Lord Craven before I leave the Castle."

If the gate-keeper had some surprise that nobles such as these should be on friendship terms with a yeoman he showed it not; possibly much gossip eddied round him, and in these disturbed times he might have hint of more unusual associations.

" Colonel Goring is with Mistress Wilford now."

" I had hoped to see him. Is the Governor in the Castle? "

" No. Colonel Goring is in command till he returns. I'll get word to him that you are here."

What could Goring say to Cynthia, I asked myself? He was a clever man. Was his infatuation so gross that he could imagine she was as some other women, perverse and stubborn in her beauty, in her innocence, but vulnerable in the end. He was experienced; he could not mis-read her so. Stephen Brockman was wrong and there could be but one way for Goring.

As the gate-keeper returned I moved to meet him.

" You are to come with me, Master Neame."

I was sensible of a change in his manner, a precision, a cooler look, and as I followed him through paved ways and across a courtyard he no longer showed a desire to talk with me.

" Here is Colonel Lyall," he said, and I saw, ahead of us near the entrance to the Constable's Tower, a tall thin cavalier, with serious face. He stood in front of half a file of the Castle guard, five in number with a sergeant.

"I have to take you before Colonel Goring," he said.

Through a gloomy passage we proceeded to a flagged lobby where we halted. Lyall knocked at a door and passed within. He returned almost immediately, threw the door open, and we entered the hall of the Constable's Tower. A church-like silence and emptiness struck at me as we crossed the threshold. The walls were high and deeply embrasured, the light was dim, a graveyard mustiness prevailed, the floor was without furniture except at the far end where Goring sat behind a table, with a clerk, pen in hand, on his left.

The King's Commissioner raised his eyes as we clattered in.

"The guard to remain outside the door, Sergeant. Bring our visitor here, Lyall." He pointed to a spot on the floor about a dozen feet in front of him. Something in the deliberation of Goring's words, in the steadiness of his wide-opened eyes, gave me warning.

I had miscalculated. Before me was no purposeful lover with fierce anticipation in him.

He beckoned Lyall to a seat by his side, then swung in his chair to confront me squarely.

"What is the reason of this intrusion?"

"Mistress Wilford was decoyed from my home yesterday."

"Your assertion that you carried a royal message was false?"

"I wished to make sure of access to you with my information."

"They were my men who took Mistress Wilford from your farm. Have you any further news?"

"Sir Edward Granville is spurring to London to fetch her father."

"Sir Edward Granville is presumptuous."

His voice was without temper. He tapped his knuckles on the table as he surveyed me, and then turned to Lyall.

"This is the farmer—the Canterbury man."

"The one who was insolent?"

"He was more than insolent. He nearly broke my neck. He was puffed up at escorting Mistress Wilford to her lodging, and had a crowd at his back."

Goring looked at me.

"Neame, I am sure you think yourself bold in coming here. You are only a stupid young man."

"At Canterbury, I was compelled——"

"Sometime I will turn you over to my grooms for chastisement. This morning I have other uses for you."

"I come only that justice may be served," I said restrainedly.

"You will have opportunity. Tell him the position, Lyall."

"Colonel Goring holds the King's Commission to enquire into the attempt on the royal train between Canterbury and Dover. He sits in judgment this morning."

"I am glad that I have arrived in time to straighten the matter."

"I will see that you do so," said Goring. "Listen, Neame, I have held my hand in respect of you principally because I wished to strike down the known rogue first. You have come opportunely. I hope you may be able to prove your loyalty. I am the King's representative. I trample a traitor as I would a viper—let that traitor be man or woman."

"Mistress Wilford is not in question to-day," remarked Lyall.

" Her guilt is not proved," Goring spoke with evenness. " She goes before his Majesty in any case. Neame, you can give evidence about Herrill? "

" I am here with that intention."

" You have been one of the victims. Neame, if you have committed crime against the King hope not to profit by any pleadings from Mistress Wilford."

" I seek no favour."

" You will receive none. Yet she has drawn you into danger."

" Mistress Wilford is blameless."

" She has brought me annoyance," went on Goring. " I tried to rescue her and what were my thanks! Attached to the Court she had been drawn into a plot against his Majesty. She would not be warned; she was like flint against advice. She was only to be saved in spite of herself. The one way was to remove her quickly to the care of her father. The headstrong child flees from me, spouting to all and sundry a tale of ardour and would-be outrage. But enough, bring them in. Let's probe the business."

" Captain Harvey will attend the prisoners," said Lyall.

" Yes, send Harvey with them."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE KING'S COMMISSIONER IN JUDGMENT

"JASPER HERRILL, I have brought you here to answer the charge of conspiracy against His Majesty. Before me lies evidence that you sought to organise an attack on the King, his attendants and his property, during the progress from Canterbury to Dover. It seems you gathered men and arms to enforce robbery; you were prepared for murder. The hand of Providence prevented both. What have you to say?"

Goring's voice was deep and unimpassioned. He sat upright in his chair. I could not deny he was a shapely figure of a man, imposing in his handsomeness and dignity. He had made himself scrupulously fine. His wavy hair fell below his shoulders, glistening with the care which had been bestowed upon it. His doublet of black velvet was fringed at neck and wrist with deep point lace. His silk stockings were gartered with bows of red ribbon, and silver buckles glittered on his shoes. On the table lay his hat, not the usual soft beaver with drooping feather, but one more formal, with high crown and band of inlaid gold. His sword was by his hat.

Worn and mudstained was the man he challenged, for Herrill, not yet recovered of his hurt, carried the marks of his sojourn in the herdman's hut. Days of beard were on his face, his doublet was torn, his boots were caked with dried soil. He held his injured foot lightly on the floor; I doubt not it pained him. His hair was awry. Yet despite his disarray Herrill was not the lesser

man. His back was very straight, his lips clipped firm, and in the set of him, in his hard eyes, was the old steeliness and competency. His look went across to Cynthia as Goring spoke. We were in a half circle, and she was on my right, seated on a stool.

Herrill pointed his finger towards her.

"Is this fitting?" he asked.

"I have a reason," said Goring.

"You must not expect me to answer questions while she is here."

"Sufficient that you have the opportunity. Give me the documents, Perkin."

He took some papers from the clerk, spread them out on the table in front of him, and browsed over them.

"On February 11 you arrived at Canterbury and let it be known you were an officer attached to the King's household. You were in conversation that evening with John Cantile, one of the would-be makers of an association against the King in Kent and adjoining counties. You met him in the stable yard of 'The Rose' inn. Hickin, the maltster of Dover, a declared rebel, visited you at 'The Fleur de Lis' late that night. On the morning of the twelfth you were in the market place talking with Richard Bolton, the miller of Chartham, and Clasper Fly, a locksmith of Canterbury, both of whom are ranters against the King. Sometime in the day Geoffrey Neame arrived and joined you at 'The Fleur de Lis'; you worked together from that time on. You and he were at Harbledown to watch the approach of the royal procession to Canterbury. Do you agree that a conspiracy against the King was shaped in Canterbury, and that you were the leader of it?"

"Proceed with your exposition."

"On February 13 John Grimston, an ostler at the

'Fountain Inn,' received five shillings from you for information about the coaches. On the evening of that day you accompanied George Meston, the militiaman from Sturry, to the blacksmith's in Watling Street and paid ten shillings for repair of the iron stand for his harquebus, Meston being a violent partisan against the King. These facts require an explanation."

"A thorough piece of work, Goring, but what an infinity of effort towards a simple aim."

Goring's mask was undisturbed.

"I am prepared to give some range to a man on trial for his life."

"The programme would be unnecessary, Goring, were you a person of courage. I am in your way. Unfortunately you are one who is only brave with women."

Goring did not speak.

"Pray consider the inducements I offer. My reach is less than yours, I am inches shorter. In age you have the advantage by years. My foot is lamed from a recent accident."

"Evasions, quite useless evasions," said Goring. "You know well enough, Herrill, that all this has no bearing on the charge against you."

"I prefer the facts about you, to those about myself. Why this mummery!"

"If any plea for you, any evidence in your favour were forthcoming I would hear it, weigh its value."

"I have something more forceful for your thoughts, Goring. Wilford by this time knows of your vileness to his daughter. Granville too. I am warm with the perception of your rewards."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"I make no promise."

"You have heard the testimony that lies against you.

Not one word has come from you to show your innocence. Why I have Mistress Wilford here this morning is that she may convey to all, to the King if need be, the regularity of these charges, the opportunity I have given you for denial. Hers shall be the voice to speak the fair treatment you have had."

Cynthia rose to her feet.

"Will not Colonel Goring go to the King? I will go with him. I will tell all."

"Mistress Wilford, at this hour and for this purpose, I am the King."

"Is there nothing I can do, nothing?"

Herrill answered her.

"This you can do, dear child, the greatest thing of all —remember the name you bear."

"He sought to break me." She burst out. "When he came to me this morning and told me you were a prisoner in the castle I turned my back on him. Perhaps I thus condemned you."

"You make me proud and happy."

"Time presses," said Goring. "Neame, you may tell your story."

I had kept my head cast down when Herrill and Cynthia were brought in, had failed with any sign at Cynthia's exclamation. Afterwards I had allowed no recognition in my face to either as I stood between them, with hands clasped behind my back.

When Goring spoke Herrill eyed me nimbly. The sight of Cynthia, on her stool nursing her knee, reminded me of the day she sat on the heap of oaten straw in the barn and talked with me.

I thrust my head back.

"You have threatened me and you have promised me leniency, Colonel Goring, and I wish you to know that

neither persuasions nor the thought of any harm you can do me will cause me to deviate in the plain tale which I bring hither. I come to prevent injustice. Also to help a young girl. My mother and my sister and I have affection for Mistress Wilford who has found shelter under our roof and has broken bread with us. She has been pursued by distress. Her friends are far away. That Herrill is guiltless of the charge made against him is but an incident to her terror. But his innocence provides an opportunity, on her behalf, for one such as I, who knows the truth. It does more, Colonel Goring, it calls on me to testify for righteousness. I have burned in the secrecy of my endeavours, yet was I urged against self-glory. To-day I am uplifted to my plain assignment. In serving Mistress Wilford I but serve myself the more. No longer should I keep within covert. I am exalted that I stand here a witness for my own sake."

"What rubbish is this?" said Goring. "I want the facts."

"Those facts shall be as wormwood in your mouth, Colonel Goring. Learn then, that the burden of what you call a transgression is not upon Herrill but upon me, and me alone. I come without excuses but rather with justification and a full heart. Three months ago my father, a loyal man, was done to death by those who pride themselves on fealty to the King. John Neame had committed no evil, his name stood for good faith and kindliness in all the countryside. From Dover to Canterbury, from Ramsgate to Maidstone he was known as a grower of great crops, and a friend of the needy. They killed him because he was a man and not a serf. From that day my eyes were opened, and I saw the light. I worked without remission and in quietude with those who think that dominion rests not with princes. We

builded strength for the Parliament wherever we could.

"From London arrived news that Charles was contriving to send across the sea a portion of the nation's treasure. I designed to prevent the theft, and to rescue the crown jewels. I formed a plan. Through many days and nights I had the help of godly men of courage in making it complete. There came to me this Jasper Herrill who had served the King, who had the rich garments of the court upon him entailing confidence and entry where we most desired it. He gave me a narration of ill-treatment which was believable. He was well skilled in arms. I took him to be ripe for vengeance. And thus it was that he and I were much together in those days at Canterbury.

"At Patrixbourne with all in readiness for the blow, I was frustrated. Herrill is a traitor but not a traitor to the King. A few minutes before the procession reached our ambuscade he called me apart to a thicket for consultation. A confederate was in waiting and I was taken by surprise from behind, gagged, thrown into a ditch. Mine was the hand which should have felled the elm across the road to stop the coaches and bring out my men from hiding for their work. The King and his train went by in safety.

"Some time those who were deceived at Canterbury and Patrixbourne by Jasper Herrill may make their settlement with him. I decide not to see him hanged for what I did, though such a consummation would give a rich gratification to many who laboured with me for right. I have not taken counsel with them. You asked for the facts, Colonel Goring, I trust you like the taste of them."

Cynthia sat gazing at me as though under a spell. Herrill had quickened; I could feel his alertness as his

eyes, narrowed to pin-points, went slowly round to Goring. He found no mark of surprise or disturbance in the King's Commissioner.

" You have much audacity, Neame; I cannot think that you would attempt to trifle with me on such an occasion. I must take your statement, fantastic as it may appear, with gravity. How now, Herrill? You are deposed from the position of arch-conspirator."

Herrill did not open his mouth.

" One thing more," I said. " You can hardly hang a King's servant for service to His Majesty. I rely on Mistress Wilford to inform the King of my confession. I have made further provision. I have given my declaration to Stephen Brockman, a jurat of this town, for transmission to Sir Thomas Wilford."

" Have you any other safeguards? "

" They are enough."

" Clumsy fool. Let it be known to you and others here that no consequences can divert me from my obligation. The morrow does not exist for me. I have my day's duty to perform."

I had a sight of his unchained malignity. My lies might well miscarry, not so much from his astuteness (and astute was he beyond the ordinary) but from a submerged passion greater than any love of his could ever be. If I trembled it was not for myself but for the success of my attempt. I saw Cynthia's horror-stricken face, I saw Herrill watching like an eagle, searching the next move. But it was Goring who transfixed me; I read his heart. I felt him capable of all.

The man I feared for had no tremors; he sweated hatred and contempt.

" Do not posture, Goring. Neame puts you in a new perplexity. The choice of two and only one to hang!

Which departure will the most advantage you? Or least destroy you? A pretty problem."

Goring was contemplative, slow in speaking.

"The choice of two? I see not the necessity, Herrill. We are not short of hemp; the beam is strong. You have been in company before, you and he."

He turned to Cynthia.

"See, girl, to what you have brought them."

"I see two brave men whom you cannot affright."

I know not which of her listeners were most surprised; Goring the best concealed it.

"Spitfire, you have brought them low," he said with as near an approach to a frown as I had seen on his face that morning.

"But not so low as he who now condemns them. You are the King, you say. There is a sovereignty which no usurpation can depose. It is before you."

She took a breath.

"You would kill Master Herrill. Earlier this morning you would have spared him."

"Not, on my oath, petulant girl."

"You told me what you meant to do to him. You waited my reply, waited, waited."

"You are in early years for such a shrewing tongue. Were the issue of less importance your fancy for these two men, the hold you have on each might call for some indulgence. I cannot permit it. I have to disturb your vanity, Mistress Wilford. You must not count me a third in your alternatives."

"You evil man!" gasped Cynthia.

"He plays with you," said Herrill. "Make no replies to him."

"To find out your exact responsibility in this treasonable affair is not within my purview. The King must

decide on that. Your father's influence may be of service. But I am not prevented from using you to secure the truth about the prisoners in front of me."

"You cannot terrify me now."

"You think me cruel. I will prove the contrary. I could justify the doom of Neame and Herrill without further question. I hold my hand. Only one shall suffer. Neame comes with a convincing tale of guilt. Which is the chief sinner? You can tell me."

"I?"

"You were in the confidence of each, consulting with them, were thick in their intrigue at Canterbury. You shall save the life of one of them. You shall tell your father, and who you will, that I was merciful and spared where I might have slain. Now, Mistress Wilford, let us have the truth. Who was the leader?"

"Answer him not," said I. "He sets a gin."

Colour was dying from Cynthia's face.

"Neither of them——" she began.

"You ask too much," said Goring.

"I do what mother and Joan would wish," I said hoarsely. "Do not worry because of them."

Goring looked at his watch.

"I fear I can no longer hesitate, Mistress Wilford. Which of them do you love the best?"

"You hound!" I cried.

Goring had a pistol pointed at me.

"One more step forward, Neame——"

"Let be, Neame, let be," said Herrill quietly. "He has to meet Sir Thomas Wilford. You do not know Wilford."

"You must make a choice between your favourites, Mistress Wilford."

She looked at him in empty fashion and did not speak; I doubt if it were possible for her to do so.

"The drama lags," said Herrill.

"Captain Harvey, make the necessary addition to your arrangements. Bring in the guard."

I heard the door open; heard the captain's order; the marching in of the soldiers; knew that they had formed up behind me.

Cynthia had slipped from the stool to the floor, and her face was hidden in her arms, and I hoped that she had swooned.

Goring took a quill from the clerk, wrote some sentences on a piece of paper, then put down the quill in order to address Herrill and myself.

"This dallying is finished. You, Herrill, and you, Neame, were knit confederates in a treasonable outrage. You have made war on your King. For that there is one punishment. It is my duty to impose the sentence. Traitors both, prepare to meet your Maker."

He tossed the paper to the desk.

"The warrant is in order, Perkin. Keep it for record."

"Unhappy man," said Herrill, full of steadfastness, "to murder for a private end is a paltry crime. I shall not flinch; nor Neame either, I'll take oath. A brave death is not to be despised. But that you should taunt a maiden, creating her the executioner of one of us, is a revenge which makes the killing of two men a trifle."

"Gather these papers, Perkin," said Goring, "and later take them to my chamber. When the prisoners have been removed, summon Mistress Gadd to attend the girl."

I felt a giddiness growing upon me, and clenched my fists and dug my nails deep into the flesh. I prayed for some part of Herrill's courage. The faintness passed

away and left me sunken deep in a dreadful horror. Alas, for my valiancy! I could see the extra noose and pulley being fastened to the beam a few feet from the first one, with a workman busy on a ladder. I judged we should be hung twelve feet apart. I could see the two files of soldiers standing in readiness to pull on the ropes. I tried to guess the place of execution, somewhere nearby for certain, and probably under cover. I had heard that they pinioned men's wrists and ankles for a hanging. I hoped they would tie a handkerchief round my eyes.

From the distance through the door came the rumble and the jar of footsteps, the sound of voices. I made a mighty effort, put my head up hard, folded my arms across my breast. A drip from my forehead fell upon my wrists.

The noise increased. Harvey was bringing many soldiers for I could hear the clanking of arms, and I was surprised at the indiscipline, the shuffling, the exclamations. Goring had lifted a glance to the door. I was conscious of a change in Herrill, who seemed to be listening with eyes as well as ears.

Another second or two and there could be no doubt of a turmoil in the corridor with loud and angry talk. Goring was on his feet making a sign to the guard.

"Sergeant——"

The door flew open and six or eight men swept in, Cavaliers all, their riding boots streaked with mud, cloaks splashed and sodden, plumes adroop. They had ridden hard through rain and wind, these men, and had spared themselves no more than they had spared their horses. Sir Thomas Wilford was in the lead and close behind him was Granville. Harvey, pinned between two or three, was shooting forth hot words of which I heard but fragments among a chorus of vehemencies. "Just

in time," " Hell's work," " Where's the girl? " " Is that the dastard? " Wilford raised his hand above his head to check the noise and strode past me to the table.

" What does this betoken, Goring? "

" The question should come from me, Sir Thomas Wilford."

Goring's voice had the ring of authority; he looked very tall and resplendent against this short, square man with his grizzled little beard.

" What means my daughter on the floor and you at your ease? "

" I wished your daughter's help to hang two traitors. She has felt the strain. Help for her was on the way. All this does not explain your intrusion, Sir Thomas Wilford, why you, a servant of the King, have with your companions made forcible entry of the castle."

" Enough! " A wiry man with scar across his face stepped to the side of Wilford. " I am Sir Edward Boys——"

" Temporarily replaced at his Majesty's command by a trusty servant," said Goring. " The King shall hear of your latest loyalty."

Boys' hand was on his sword hilt; 'twas but three steps to Goring, and then Wilford's arm went out like a bar of iron in front of the governor.

" Best remove the guard," he said.

Boys swung round towards the soldiers who through all had been motionless.

" Sergeant Pennell! "

" Your service, Governor."

" Take out the men."

The guard tramped across the hall to the door.

" You seize possession of the Castle? " said Goring as he reached for a document on the table.

" Silence! " Wilford growled at him like a beast. " Listen to me. You have persecuted my young daughter. You have tried to abduct her. In my absence two men stood between her and your foul debasement. You were to kill these two men this morning to get them out of your way. What planned you with my daughter when they were gone? Answer me, you scullion, you gutter cut-throat! "

I had seen angry men: I had never seen such a man as Sir Thomas Wilford. Plainly dressed he differed from many of his friends in appearance. He differed, too, in temperament. He was a furnace. His words seemed like to throttle him, though they were clear enough. I knew now why this man was a proverb on the field of battle, why he alone amid the courtiers could tell Charles to his face he was a fool.

Goring could not have been unaffected but he had hardened himself and he had a weapon to his hand. He replied with sternness.

" You interrupt the course of justice. You are a member of the King's Privy Council. Here is the King's sign manual." He extended a paper. " You will find it a warrant commanding me to make enquiry into an attempted attack on the King's procession to Dover, to arrest the authors and decide their fate."

Wilford snatched the paper from him and held it at arm's length to read it.

" Yes, this is the King's warrant," he said. He tore it into small pieces and threw it on the floor. " So much for the King's warrant. The man who harms my daughter will look in vain for the protection of a monarch, be it Charles or any other."

" You know not what you do. His Majesty——"

" I'll tell the King myself," roared Wilford. " You

deceived him into signing that, sapping for a child's honour. Your peacock feathers shall not save you."

"You will answer for your words——"

"By Heaven you yourself have some answering to do," cried Granville plunging forward, and tugging at his pearl-embroidered gauntlet.

With astonishing quickness Wilford was between the two men; he took Granville by the shoulders and pushed him backward.

"No, no, Granville; that is not the way."

The Cavaliers were pressing round, and Captain Harvey broke loose and went over to stand by Goring.

"Gentlemen," said Wilford, "you have arrived in time to prevent a foul murder. I ask your patience while I speak with my daughter alone. Colonel Goring and his Captain will remain here under your eye. I would remind you that Sir Edward Boys is Governor of the castle."

He passed through the group to join Herrill, who, with Cynthia in his arms, was making for the door, and the Cavaliers fell to talk among themselves with a light oath or two, with a shaking of cloaks and sodden hats, and glances at Goring and Harvey, who stood in whispered converse. One slim young fellow drew a comb from his breast to smooth his hair. Sir Edward Boys paced up and down in thought.

Granville separated himself from his friends and led me by the arm to a corner of the hall and asked me what had happened. I told him briefly.

"You must have made a marvellous ride," I said.

"There is no such mare in England. She has a soul. As we started I gave her the story, told her the need, and believe me, Master Neame, I felt her quicken under me. One must ride that mare to know what the flight of a

bird feels like. Before I reached Canterbury I was holding her in for her own sake. At Canterbury I gave the lass a sip of water and fifteen minutes rest, and made arrangements for a supply of horses in the morning. I set them in a buzz at ' The Fountain.' ' King's business,' said I; ' a dozen mounts at eight o'clock to wait my orders. Double price. Fail not. 'Tis life or death.' I'll wager they're talking still. On to Rochester, where past midnight I roused ' The Bull,' trumpeted my royal errand, kissed hostess Beazley—a comely matron—and left assured of the horses. I had to press the mare to London —the roads would cause Gabriel to swear. Poor girl, she shall have a full week's rest. Yet over the cobbles to Wilford's lodging at Westminster she cantered and whisked her tail like a two year old. If ever I meet as good a friend in man I'll tie to him for life. I soon had Wilford out of bed. You should have seen him—there's a bit of Satan in Wilford. He would have roused York House, had the King from his couch, wrested from him a revokement to Goring, and then he remembered Charles was at Greenwich. ' Sir Edward Boys is here to make his peace,' says he. ' I had three words with him to-day. He's one of the Court's unwelcome counsellors. I'll have him on his horse within the hour.' He lodges by St. Martin's Church. Can we find others? ' ' Leave that to me,' says I. I went round to ' The Golden Fleece ' in Charles Street where there are always some who stay to hear the cock crow. 'Twas a busy night. A dozen or more of them with cards and dice, a hundred candles so it seemed. Tom Verney was singing a merry song. Some day I'll shock your Puritan ears with it. They gave me hail. I made my speech—how Wilford was on horse and raging, calling for volunteers to save his girl from the ravisher at Dover Castle. Who was for a

ride? I promised 'em they had a good chance of being stabbed, and if they escaped that they'd probably be hanged for treason. They rose to a man. 'Twas a question who could get horses quickly. Five were ready for a start in fifty minutes. There would have been six, but I persuaded Sir Richard Hansell to yield his place and loan me his chestnut. We rendezvoused with Wilford and Boys outside Covent Garden Church. And here we are at Dover, Master Neame, not much past midday."

I looked at the band of rescuers; I suppose my face was serious. Granville chuckled.

"Restrain your reverence. That's Tom Verney in the puce cloak. Dick Tucker is the one combing his hair. The handsome youth is Sir Ralph Cary. He's showing his new sword hilt to Harry Blacknall; Harry killed his man last Wednesday: some matter of a main of cocks. The red-headed boy drying his hat is Hugh Dillon. They'll not do for your conventicle, Master Neame. Every one of them could drink you under the table, big as you are."

Wilford had come in as Granville was speaking, and he went to Sir Edward Boys and exchanged some sentences with him, before he walked over to the younger men.

"Gentlemen, my home at Waveney Manor is within three miles. I beg your acceptance of such hospitality as can be furnished at short notice. To-morrow my daughter and I ride to London with Sir Edward Boys to make our report to His Majesty. We leave Colonel Goring at the castle till we have the King's pleasure in light of what we have to tell him."

"Leave him untouched!" Granville set loose other appeals.

" He wears a sword," " Can't we take him with us? " " There's a rope in readiness? "

" I suggest the wiser course," said Wilford. " If you will do me the honour to accompany me to Waveney, I shall have opportunity of explaining in more detail the reasons for this proposal. Be very certain, Colonel Goring is not to fly his infamy. Master Neame, a word with you."

I went over to him.

" We'll get out to the open," he said.

He walked with me to the corridor, thence through ways, familiar for him, to the courtyard. There with no one within hearing he stopped and faced me.

" I have to give you a father's thanks."

" I wished to save her," was all I could say.

He looked at me with those keen grey eyes of his in a searching, kindly manner. He seemed to be asking himself questions, accommodating himself to a new aspect.

He broke away from his thoughts bluntly. " Neame, we are not out of this awkwardness and you must know the truth. Herrill is still in direct risk. He is guilty and his guilt is known. He has told me everything. He leaves within an hour or two for France, he is now on the shore to hire a fishing boat, however high the price. Goring was in the right about his warrant from the King; Charles was weak and worried and I'll try to put it straight but Goring has genuine authority. There may yet be trouble. That was why I saved him for the day; his death within the castle would have been the worst that could happen for us. Moreover, he was accurate in what he said of Boys. Boys is wobbling. Which side he'll fall I cannot say. You know the storm that's rising. Parliament practically rides the country. In the struggle

that is going on above and beneath the surface Charles will not offend leaders like myself and Goring if 'tis to be avoided. But when men and Kings are anxious passions break quickly. No one is secure. Moreover, the ground for private feuds is fertile, and hangings and shootings are quickly vindicated. You will observe the reasons for my caution."

"You were bold enough."

"I'd do it over again. But I am not blind to the chances. Besides I have now the information about Patrixbourne."

He surveyed me with his previous thoughtfulness.

"Neame, your mother and sister have left deep gratitude in Mistress Wilford—affection too."

"They feel the same for her," I said.

"About yourself I'll only say you did to-day what I should have expected of you. Have you any plans?"

"I'm going back to Splicing Oaks as soon as I can get my horse from 'The Crown.'"

"I mean about the future. You are a man of parts to rusticate. You know that great events are stirring. I am raising and training troops for the coming crisis. I offer you a captaincy of horse under my own command."

He saw my refusal before I uttered it.

"Why not?" he asked sharply.

"There is the farm."

"Oh, damn the farm!" he said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LETTERS FROM LONDON

WHEN I reached Splicing Oaks the white face of Joan and the tearful relief of my mother told me of the anxiety that had been caused by my night excursion. Joan, breathless for news, had hold of me as soon as I was off my horse. What with being home again, and the lack of sleep and of food, I found my clumsy hands were shaking, and I put on a great heartiness, and told them Cynthia and Herrill were safe, and that there was no call to be so mournful.

Ned Tulks stood grasping the bridle of the roan with his mouth open, and I asked him sharply whether the lambing ewes had been brought in from the heavy weather to the shelter of Peaky Five Acres. And when he said he reckoned Will had seen to that I demanded to know why Sefton, Ridley, old Thompson and the boy were clustered round the stable door instead of being at home as they ought to have been at that hour, whereupon my mother said Will had asked them to stay on because he didn't know what they might be wanted for.

"Where is the busy-body?"

"In the kitchen," said Joan; "he wanted to hear."

"Ned Tulks, you tell them to go home, all of them."

"They can have the mulled ale first," said mother. "Ask Lizzie Barton to take it out to them, Ned; it's in the big pan on the kitchen fire."

"You can tell them the master is glad they stopped, and everything is all right," added Joan.

In the kitchen with Will Dyson seated on an upturned wooden bucket near the door, mother and Joan active round me at the table with food and drink, and Lizzie Barton popping in frequently from the outer kitchen with eager ears, I gave them an account of what had happened in the Constable's Tower, except that I did not tell them of my sham confession nor of how close I was to being Herrill's final companion. My part, I showed them, was to make as much delay as I could by protests and warnings; and I had a stock of excitement for them in the arrival of Wilford and what followed. Joan was the most stirred with it all.

" Master Herrill, he said no word to you afterwards? "

" He had no opportunity. He went at once to the shore. Sir Thomas Wilford is a wise and experienced man."

" I hope this will be a lesson to you to keep to work on the farm, Geoffrey," said my mother.

Will sucked at an old clay pipe of my father's till the women were through with their first rush of questions, and then he said:

" Went to a mort of risk, Master."

" Geoffrey is brave," said Joan sweeping round on Will in surprising fashion; she did not usually squander compliments on me.

" What's the good of being brave for nothing? " said Will. " Master didn't do much so far as I can see, except to give this here Goring a chance to knock him on the head; that is if he told us all he done."

" Have you told us everything, Geoffrey? "

Joan came round and tried to shake me by the shoulders. I told her not to be a fool; mother had just placed two roasted partridges in front of me.

" I'll hear the whole thing from Cynthia anyway."

I put down my knife.

"How will you hear?"

"Never mind how. But Cynthia won't keep anything back from me. Why, you may yet go soldiering with her father like he asked you to."

"Not I. I've done enough."

Joan stepped back, and put her arms akimbo the better to survey me.

"How can you sit there and say such things?"

I twisted round to her.

"They've had all they want out of us," I said. "We won't hear any more of them. This is the end."

"You know as well as I do, Geoffrey, this is not the end but the beginning."

Her eyes were glowing. She came up to me and gave my hair a tug, pulling my head back. Joan never had any of Cynthia's manners. For the moment I was afraid she was going to kiss me, and even now I am not sure it wasn't in her mind, but all she did was to push my head forward again and smooth the hair which she had ruffled.

"I never saw such goings-on," said my mother.

"You'll see more than that, Mistress," remarked Will gloomily.

Ten days passed before the letter from Sir Edward Granville in London was left at the farm by Hutton, the carrier, who took a waggon between Canterbury and Deal once a week. A bulky package, sealed in four places it was addressed to "Master Paramor at 'The Fleur de Lis,' Canterbury, to be forwarded in all haste to Master Geoffrey Neame, Splicing Oaks Farm, Eastry." I guessed it had been dropped at Canterbury by the post between London and Dover.

That is what I read in a clear round handwriting, such

as was not in the gift of all the young noblemen of Granville's temperament and mode of life.

"MASTER NEAME,

"I write this letter to you not only because it is the wish of Sir Thomas Wilford (who has little patience in the exercise of the written word) but also because you have title to information as to what occurred following the play in Dover Castle.

"We heard your part when we were at Waveney, and all swore you behaved properly and well. Pity you weren't a gentleman, said one or two in all friendliness. I advised them not to try wits with you because you were without humbleness, whereupon they called you a gallant fighting cock, and promised to debauch you thoroughly should you come to town.

"Sir Thomas Wilford arrived in London to find that the King was not at Whitehall but lay at Greenwich, and the next morning he rode thither and cursed with heartiness when told by Secretary Nicholas that an officer was before him with papers from Goring. He waited an hour or so and presently had audience of Charles, who was fuming and had a high tone.

"'A bad business,' said he, before Wilford could get out a syllable.

"'A stinking business,' said Wilford, 'and I look to your Majesty for reparation.'

"'These are surprising words, Sir Thomas Wilford.'

"'You will share my regret that I have to use them when you know all,' replied Wilford in a kind of respectful resentment. Charles, whose dignity is always mixed with dullness, wondered what was coming. Forthwith Wilford demanded to know if he had not always been a faithful servant. Had he done aught

to lessen the King's regard? His life was at the disposal of the royal honour but no less at the disposal of his own.

" ' You tore up my warrant,' said Charles, who is very obstinate of an idea. Wilford's response had no apology in it.

" ' Your royal authority had been placed in the hands of a man who had obtained it so that he might seize and ruin a young maiden, and that maiden Cynthia Wilford. You freed a wolf with your commission.'

" ' Goring a wolf! This is no right language.'

" You may imagine Charles disturbed, agog, for whatever the deficiencies of our royal master he has no patience with women-hunters, being truly blind to the characteristics of some of those around him.

" ' No, no; she was but an accident. This is a bad accusation and should be well supported. Goring but used her, and rightly so, against two traitors. Do you know the facts? Read.'

" Charles handed to Wilford the despatch sent to him by Goring, and Wilford bent his eye upon it for a minute.

" ' Your Majesty, every word about these two men may be true or may not be true. The importance of this story is what it leaves out.'

" Wilford then set to work to tell Charles all that happened on that night when Goring tried to carry off his daughter, and how she found a refuge at your farm. He finished bravely. ' In your absence from London could I do less than raise assistance and travel fast to Dover? I tore up your warrant as you yourself would have done. You have a daughter of your own, sire.'

" ' The honour of the ladies at the court is no less to me than that of the Princess. I wish to protect them.'

" Charles has his regal moments and this was one of them. ' Did I not dismiss Stanford? Have I not warned others? These dalliers and abductors—but Goring—there has been no suspicion——'

" ' Your Majesty has been laden with heavy affairs of recent months.'

" Charles strutted up and down and among his feelings was a hurt vanity, says the observant Wilford, but soreness declined and presently he gave a decision. ' I will enquire into Goring's conduct, which may look more evil than it is, though that means no blame to your presentation, Wilford.'

" Charles had argued himself into a show of strength. ' These two men, Neame and Herrill, must be brought forward for new trial. They have confessed treason. Justice must not be thwarted.'

" ' I have further information about Neame and about Herrill,' said Wilford; ' I beg your Majesty to hear it.'

" ' Be brief, Wilford. Many matters clamour for consideration.'

" Thereupon Wilford told of your activities, and brought his monarch to a new attention, told how you went on with Herrill at Canterbury to upset his plans at the last moment, and then how you journeyed to Dover Castle for the sake of Mistress Wilford.

" ' Plainly Goring must have been misled,' said Charles. ' This person acted worthily for a yeoman. It is good there are such men in the country. Yeomen are strong for their King, Wilford.'

" ' I trust they are all like Geoffrey Neame,' was Wilford's careful reply.

" ' We come to the man Herrill,' said Charles frowningly.

" ' Yes,' said Wilford, ' we come to the man Herrill.'

" And that, Master Neame, is as far as the dialogue has been reported to me. But this I am permitted to say: that Wilford entreated the King's permission for a statement, an avowal on his own account, and it related to the history of Master Herrill and Mistress Wilford, and it was of such a nature and of so private a character that I for one have not been admitted to it. I am not troubling to guess about the story. What I do know is this. That the King was more surprised than he had been at any other part of the interview, and that at the end he said in a high-pitched irritable way, ' He must keep out of the country; he must keep out of the country,' and Wilford promised him.

" Now a personal word to yourself, Master Neame, and again I convey a message from Sir Thomas Wilford though 'tis written in much good-will by myself. London is rampant with gossip, reeking with intrigue. The Palace of Whitehall has within its thirty acres a little army of servants and officials, grand ladies and high nobles, those to whom the King is a religion, others spying for self-advancement, wary men of affairs, devil-may-care featherheads like myself and all in a boiling against the Parliament which is sitting in a building three hundred yards away and showing much resolution to wrest power from Charles. The storm is widening its circle, and you may hear its echoes in the cockpit, the taverns, the churches, the gambling houses, in many a withdrawing room and

among the merchants in the city. Fanatics are on both sides and they will yet do the mischief, for could there be a gathering of wise heads such as Colepepper, Pym, Twysden, Hyde and the like, a way out would be found if the King were willing. Thus there is some overlapping, and many, who may yet be forced into bloody conflict with each other, sit over a bottle of wine or watch a main of cocks while they discuss the struggle for the militia, the Queen's mission in Holland, a petition from the counties, or who is the next to be sent to the Tower. Rumours percolate freely. What you did at Patrixbourne has been a titbit for some days, and the Parliament people are very sour about it, and 'tis said that Pym himself was responsible for the efforts to stop the departure of the crown jewels. Some there are who freely urge that a man like you should be put between walls, and though I gather nothing definite of a purpose to arrest you, your name smells badly with those who can make mischief, and you should be on your guard from now onwards.

"A good many who are in the thick of affairs on our side are suspect—many on the other side too. Some waver in opinion, others are seeking their own best advantage. Buying and selling is going on, of that I am certain. Colonel Lyall is seen frequently in the neighbourhood of Westminster, and is much taken up with Goring. Lyall is uncovered as the pedlar who came to your farm. I know not Lyall's mission but I am prepared to believe any wickedness of Goring.

"Pray make my compliments to Mistress Neame and your sister.

"EDWARD GRANVILLE."

Next week three letters came from Cynthia, one to my mother, one to Joan, and one to myself. This was Cynthia to my mother:

"Dearest Mistress Neame,

"I doubt if you need word from me of gratitude, because a full half of my thoughts are always with Splicing Oaks, and they should come through the air to you, even as they hover through my dreams at night. Nevertheless I say thank you from my heart for your protecting and your tenderness, and days which will ever be endearing in my memory.

"Sir Edward Granville has written to your son to tell him how my father has made his peace with the King. This has relieved me for my father's sake, as well as for those brave gentlemen who rode down to Dover with him. I am now afflicted with smaller anxieties since my father has to leave for the north, either for York or Hull, whither the King himself is to go shortly.

"You see me therefore deep in reflections of some new dresses and boots, and I rest much on the advice of my two friends Dorothy Leeke and Mary Verney, who are guests with me at the Eures, Mary being Doctor Denton's niece. My father has told me to spend not more than ten pounds, and with a dress costing over a pound for the making alone, with satin at fourteen shillings a yard, and taffety sarcenet at nine shillings there will be no large balance after the purchase of two cloaks, a new hood, a pair of boots for out of doors, and three holland coats, the latter with tape and fustian to them taking half a guinea. Some of the needlework I do myself, and wish often for the skill of you and Joan. I think of your beautiful linen

and of Joan's embroidery. I am sending a comb to you and a thimble to Joan if only that I would not be forgotten by you. Indeed from selfishness alone I wish to be remembered because I intend when this trouble is over to beg of you more of your hospitality. I could not always stay away from Splicing Oaks. When I told my father this he looked serious just for one moment, and then he said, 'But you ran away from it once, Cynthia.' He smiled and I think he means me to come if you will have me sometime.

"I have diversions here in the midst of my industry, because the Dentons and the Verney connections are very agreeable folk, and we have much lively talk, and we ride out sometimes, one day trying our horses as far as Hackney.

"Sir Ralph Verney, the husband of Mary, and his friend, Master James Dillon, of Oxford University, were here some days, and whereas Sir Ralph is grave, studious and kindly, Master Dillon is full of life and gaiety. There is much joking between him and Dolly Leeke.

"My father who is in his old lodging at Westminster comes to see me daily, and sometimes Sir Edward Granville comes with him, and very often Tom Verney also, a brother of Sir Ralph, and one of the band who rode to Dover. Master Dillon is very witty. I must tell you of what happened the other day. Doll Leeke and Mary Verney are very fond of teasing him, and while we were sitting at dinner around the table, a good party of us, a letter was handed along to him so that all saw it. It was sealed with two little hearts and marked, 'If you love me open not this letter till you are in company with many.' He broke the seals and found nothing within but a

sheet of plain paper. There was great merriment and he charged Dolly Leeke and Mary Verney with the joke on him. When he left for his home the next day he left a letter for Mistress Eure, in which he said, 'Tell the two fair ones from me that I was ashamed to see a letter from them in which there was not one modest word.'

"I took a cold three days since but was cured by Dr. Denton who gave me a spoonful of honey with a nutmeg scraped into it. I would be grateful if you would send to me the recipe for the wheaten flummery which was so delicious.

"A noise comes in at the window now because it is evening time and there are footmen and linkmen and carriages in the Square, many making ready to go to the play. I have some excitement in it all, yet I can freely say I would exchange most readily for that which I should see and hear to-morrow morning at Splicing Oaks, the hens in the farmyard, Joan feeding the calves, Ridley getting water out of the well. I send my love to dearest Mistress Neame.

"CYNTHIA WILFORD.

"P.S.—I have found the secret of aurum potabile, that essence of gold which cures all diseases and which you were desirous to learn about. True it shimmers and has the gleam of gold, but it is no essence of gold, only a strong cordial with tiny pieces of gold leaf in it."

This was Cynthia's letter to me:

"DEAR MASTER NEAME,

"You would not wish me to find words to thank you for Dover. I can only say God bless you and protect you always.

" Every day I think of my friends at Splicing Oaks and what I owe them. I hope sometime to see them all again.

" My father would like to have you join him, but I would not presume to give you advice, having reason for great faith in your judgment.

" CYNTHIA WILFORD."

When these letters had been read out we looked to Joan for her letter was nearly as long as mother's. She had a bright air, a touch of laughter.

" What Cynthia has to say to me is not for other eyes or ears." She thrust the letter into her bosom.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WORK BY WILL ON MAY DAY

AT noon on the first of May I set forth to see the games on the green, having given orders to the men, just as my father used to do, that they were free after their morning's work to enjoy themselves as they would; and when I came out by the Blacksmith's lane into the roadway I found the village already blithely astir with preparations. Children were laughing and shouting on the green, and old Drayson, the blacksmith, and Jenkins, the ostler from " The Five Bells," and Norris from the upper mill were digging a pit four feet deep for the May-pole, with sober jokes accompanying a leisurely piece of work. I walked over and had a word with them, and then helped Cobbler Pestron and his nephew to set up the straw-stuffed target for the archery on the corner of the green near the church. By the time this was finished I saw Mistress Bonny with some of the women folk lifting stools over the palings of " The Bull " garden, and lining them along under the trees; they brought out a big table on which were placed the prizes—a weaned young pig in a basket, a bushel of flour, a seed cake, and also a large tansy I had brought from Joan—and no one could compound better than Joan the tansy juice, the cream, the honey and the canary.

Squire Boteler, leaning on his big stick, came along with Parson Blechynden, and it was he who directed the position of the trestles under the hedge to carry the two barrels of ale, presently to be tapped. He smote me on the shoulders with his stick.

"Grow much more, Geoffrey, and we won't need a maypole out of the woods."

"He's past the sapling stage," said Parson Blechynden; "the girls want to dance with him not around him."

"More useful things than dancing with girls," replied the Squire. He lifted his stick and pointed down the road where Jim Hudson and Ned Tulks were sagging under the weight of a thirty feet pole, eight inches at the butt, while around them were a crowd of boys and girls, some of the latter having tied handkerchiefs and ribbons to the top of the pole, and holding on to them while they danced to a rhythm which they sang continuously.

"Tuppeny, thrippiny, oh, hey;
Pinks and roses, corn and hay.
Tuppeny, thrippeny, oh, hey,
Ray, ray, ray."

Jim Hudson and Ned Tulks put down the pole in the road to wipe the sweat from their faces, and Hudson sent a shout towards us for help. I walked to the road, told the two men to stand clear, and then I took the pole by the middle, swung it to my shoulder and carried it to the green, while the girls were still clinging to the ribbons and singing.

"There's a man of Kent for you," said the Squire. "Here you, Jenkins, come and tap one of these barrels of beer."

But the Squire was not so genial an hour afterwards when the races had begun, and Pestron was tuning up his viol, and some of the maids and young men were practising the steps of "Once I loved a maiden fair," to be given with proper elaboration later on. A spiced cur-

rant cake was one of his gifts for the occasion and it had been temporarily placed on a rush-bottomed chair near the end of the table, Mistress Bonny intending to give it prominence when some of the pile of bread and cheese had been eaten. Dozens of people were on the green by this time, some of them from villages or farms far away. A cowman from near Eythorne, by name Nicholas Brett, stopped to make his mouth water at the sight of the Squire's cake, near which sat old Gaffer Pettman on a stool.

"Good cake that!" said Brett.

"Aye, we bakes good cakes in Eastry," said the old man.

"Who's to have the cake, Gaffer?"

"I baint giving the cake to no one," said Gaffer Pettman, shading his eyes with his hand to observe the first of the archery contests.

Nicholas Brett walked on a step or two and then returned.

"Gaffer, I'll give you two pennies to cut half that cake."

The old man screwed up those light blue eyes of his reflectively.

"I won't stop you from a-cutting the cake."

He clutched the two pennies which Brett held out to him, rose stiffly from his stool and hobbled off to lose himself with the people near the gateway.

When the Squire discovered the mutilation of his cake he sent forth a bellow like an angry bull, and he was quickly encircled by a questioning and protesting group. The indignant shrillness of Mistress Bonny, the denials of innocent boys united with the suggestion from Pestron that a calf in the adjoining plot had broken through the fence and helped himself. The Squire was booming out

oaths as Parson Blechynden led up the guileless Brett, with crumbs about his mouth, and part of the cake still in his hand, to give a stumbling and frightened explanation.

"Where's that old rascal, Pettman?" bellowed the Squire, and the villain of the occasion was found near the door of "The Bull," and escorted back by a noisy crowd. He was a picture of senile simplicity, his light blue eyes full of enquiry and wonderment, and he gaped aimlessly as Squire Boteler hurled the charge at him.

"It war'nt my cake; I told him so. I don't know what he gave me the two pennies for."

Then the anger of Mistress Bonny only added to the merriment, and as for the Squire he thumped his stick three times on the ground and cried, "Damme, the old sinner."

"I be eighty-eight," cackled Gaffer Pettman as if that settled the whole matter.

"You're a thieving old scoundrel," exclaimed the Squire. "Have you never heard about picking and stealing? Do you know I'm a Justice of the Peace? Sing us your song, rot you!"

Gaffer Pettman was hoisted to an upturned beer barrel, and stragglers came hastening in from all parts of the green. The old man crackled out his song with a kind of slow gusto.

"KNIGHT OF THE SHIRE.

"My name it is Dobbin, who pulls the plough;
Home's at the barn, and the barley mow.
Eating my oats, champing my hay,
Doing a steady acre a day:
Who'd be a Knight of the Shire!"

" My name it is Dimple, who gives the milk,
I've crumpled horns but udder like silk.
I chew my cud and turn things over:
Vetches in plenty, or else it's clover:
Who'd be a Knight of the Shire! "

" I'm Tousle, the sheep-dog: the cows know me well.
Barking's my laughing, but who's there to tell.
I chase the rabbits,—they'll have to run faster,
Sleep in between whiles, eat bacon with master:
Who'd be a Knight of the Shire! "

" My name is John Yeoman, I farm my own land.
Dobbin, Dimple and Tousle, they eat from my hand.
I'm owner indeed of more than these:
Brown soil and sunshine, the trees and the breeze:
Who'd be a Knight of the Shire! "

In a buzz of laughter and clapping the crowd helped Gaffer Pettman from the barrel, and all the thanks they got was, " I reckon as how a horn of ale wouldn't do me any harm."

The old man was drinking his ale with cronies round him, and the people were splitting up to other diversions, when I saw Will Dyson hurriedly threading his way to me across the green.

" I've run nearly all the way from Ash," he said, breathlessly. " They're a-coming for you, Master Geoffrey."

" Coming for me? Who? "

" Men on horses, a dozen of them; they're Parliament men. They've come from Maidstone to take you."

" To take me! "

" They were watering their horses at ' The Ship.' I was carrying two ducks over to the parson for your

mother. Farmer Proud comes out of 'The Ship,' stops me in the road, and tells me what he heard in the tap-room."

"Farmer Proud was fooling you, Will. It's May Day."

"I saw them, Master Geoffrey, I saw them." Will stamped his foot in his anxiety. "They've got swords and pistols. They'll be here soon."

Will looked nervously over the moving throng in the meadow towards the Woodnesborough Road.

"They're to meet someone here who's to point you out. They're strangers. They only know you're tall and big. Some man's telling them; Farmer Proud didn't hear who it was."

I had some difficulty in swallowing Will's news. Parliament, it is true, was making its pressure felt in unexpected ways and places but till then I had heard of no actual arrests other than of leaders who were known or supposed to be opposing Master Pym's policy or seeking to subvert it. I was but a farmer, of no importance outside my parish. My sympathies had certainly not been with the King; the circumstances of my father's death were talked of even now. As for Patrixbourne, that mad effort was well-nigh three months old, not an episode for the Parliament to trumpet to the world.

I was thinking thus while Will was peering keenly over the crowd and beyond, and he cut my thoughts short by seizing my arm.

"Don't look round, Master Geoffrey. Make for the churchyard. He hasn't seen you."

"Who hasn't seen me?"

"Hickin."

I whirled on my heel and made for the church, Will along beside me. I paused at the porch then pushed

open the door and walked into the nave; it was just as well to make sure.

" Seek out the parson and the squire," I said, " tell them about the troopers and say there is need to cause all the people to scatter away from the green at once."

" What about you, Master Geoffrey? "

" I'm going to climb to the belfry. I want to see what happens; if there's trouble, I'll come down."

Will sped on his mission, and as I stumbled up the dark stairway my mind was darting hither and thither with conjectures and apprehensions. What did they intend to do? What would happen when they rode their horses on to the green? I gritted my teeth with a promise of damage to Hickin if his men should put hands on me.

As I hurried up the last part of the stairway, all a-fret to see what was happening in the meadow below, I had some flashes of understanding. Hickin had been the scapegoat for the Patrixbourne failure—easy to trace his impulse for revenge and rehabilitation. Maidstone was a centre against the King. He had persuaded the new Parliamentary agent there that I was a dangerous person, and had borrowed troopers to take me. What more appropriate than that I should be seized in the midst of the ungodly and heathenish junketings on May Day? I could read it all.

The last few steps of the stairway I took three at a time, and panting with my hurry I reached the lattice work and make espial of the meadow below. Dismay fell on me. People were still spread all over the green enjoying themselves, and it was clear no warning had been given. I saw Will; he was by the gate on the other side, standing with his hand crooked behind his ear, gazing intently along the road. Suddenly he heard

something, for he swung round with excitement all over him, throwing a despairing look over the crowd for a sight of parson or squire. He lifted his head to the church tower and I was tempted to shout to him, a foolish notion which I checked just in time. He stood there, his mind in a tangle, all wrought up, and then his eye lighted on the garden of "The Bull" where Hickin was concealed. He spun round and dashed off along the Woodnesborough Road apparently to meet the oncoming riders. Feeling like a coward up in my refuge I was to go hot and cold with suspense before I knew the daring and reckless expedient which had been born in Will.

He encountered the troopers, ten in number, at the juncture of the Sandwich Road. At Will's upraised hand their leader, a hard-faced man with curls as long as those of any Cavalier, by name Colonel Sandys, reined in his horse and scowled at the wizened little countryman in a smock, who stood in the middle of the road.

"What do you want, clown?"

"I'm from Master Hickin. Are you Maidstone men?" Will's voice was bold enough, but his heart was in a jelly.

"What of it?" demanded Sandys. "Quick with your message if you've got one. Where's Hickin?"

"He's watched. Geoffrey Neame knows he's here, and has sworn to kill him if he raises a hand. Master Hickin is staying in the inn."

"Swords and snakes! Is this the poltroon we have to help us?"

"We heard he was a weak vessel at Patrixbourne," said a burly man in front of the group. "Let us on to the Lord's work without him."

"What of a trap?" growled Sandys. He looked at Will. "Who are you?"

"Faithful Williams is my name. I work in Master Hickin's malt house. He was led to bring me with him. Truly it was well he did so. This Geoffrey Neame is a terrible Goliath. Master Hickin has a plan."

"Ignore the faint-heart," exclaimed the burly trooper.

"Your message, sirrah!" said Sandys to Will.

"There are fifty men in the meadow, all friends of Geoffrey Neame. A sight of you soldiers on horseback and they'll be scattering for scythes and bill hooks to say nought of a musket or two."

"A fine commander, this Hickin!" sneered Sandys. "Couldn't he foresee all this?"

"'Twas a mischance that Neame caught sight of him."

"What does he wish of us?"

"To leave a man with the horses in the lane a hundred yards behind you here. Then to come along on foot."

"How are we bettered?"

"You will be little noticed on foot. Act swiftly and you will be away with Neame before his friends know he has been seized. He sits in the garden of 'The Bull.'"

"Waiting for his friend Hickin!" said Sandys.

"He is a gloomy and revengeful young man," remarked Will.

Sandys gave a curt order to the troopers to dismount, and within a minute or two they were stringing along the road towards the village, Sandys in the lead with Will by his side. They might have been travellers who had alighted for refreshment at the inn, for they were in plain array without headpieces, and they had left their carbines with their horses. Stragglers in the road stared, and some girls on the edge of the green paused in their

skipping as the little procession went by. What was Will's design? I realised that now he must be in jeopardy as grave as my own.

Will stepped ahead of the soldiers to enter the inn by the back way, and when he had a glimpse of Hickin sitting amid the trees with a quart of beer on a stool before him, he offered up a prayer of thanksgiving.

Hickin heard the click of the wicket which gave entry from the courtyard to the garden, and turned, and then at the sight of Will rose to his feet with darkening face.

"Why, Master Hickin!" said Will.

"Yes, Will Dyson, we meet again, but it's different from Patrixbourne."

"Surely you're not joining in these games," said the shocked Will. "You wouldn't give encouragement to their wicked——"

"Stop your blasphemy, fool, and look not round for the way of escape. I have you now. I'm here for Judas; his servant comes with him."

Hickin began to advance on Will who with frightened mien cried out in a louder voice than he had used before, "Don't touch me, Master Neame."

The rustle and scuffling in the shrubs behind were lost on Hickin, for Will, as he dodged before his attacker, was crying out shrilly, "You cannot injure me, Master Neame, for I am as David facing the giant, and the giant was brought low."

And when Will had reached thus far, men sprang out of shelter from the bushes—four or five of them—and bore Hickin to the ground. He had no chance for he did not even see his assailants until he was struggling with them, and others poured out of hiding as soon as he was down. They were expeditious, these dragoons, quickened, moreover, by terse words from their leader,

and within a minute they had tied Hickin's arms firmly behind him, and gagged him with a towel, which Will had secured from a clothes' line.

Villagers who were nearest came running up to the palings, spying between the shrubs to find out the cause of the disturbance. But the cover of the greenery and the speed with which the capture was made left most of those on the meadow ignorant of the raid. Curiosity and excitement spread, however, as the dragoons with Hickin in their midst emerged to the road and soon a score or more were following the soldiers and their prisoner. Hickin was writhing and twisting, and progress along the road was slow.

" Hasten, master," cried Will.

Sandys whipped out his sword and pricked Hickin with it from the rear; he moved briskly enough after that.

The onlookers had swelled to a little crowd when the soldiers rode off with Hickin on a spare horse. He was still gagged. He moved his head frantically from side to side in his effort to make himself understood, whereupon Sandys smote him heavily across the ear with a gauntlet to keep him quiet.

When the horsemen had gone from sight I came down from the belfry to find Will with squire and parson in the middle of a noisy crowd. Will, nervous about his exploit, was taking cover in some incoherent talk about orders from me to help the soldiers in their descent on a malefactor from Dover. I had a word with him and then I bluntly told them the truth. Everybody became silent during my explanation but mutterings broke out all over the crowd as I finished. The squire was purple.

" Men, you'd have stood by Geoffrey Neame? "

"Aye, Sir." "There was plenty of us." "Why don't Will Dyson tell us?" "I got a gun in the cart house, squire."

Parson Blechynden managed to make himself heard in the shouting.

"Best as it was, people. We don't want fighting and bloodshed in Eastry. With all these women here, too."

"Don't like letting them get away," said Pestron.

"They may be back," called out Norris, the miller.

Squire banged his stick on the ground.

"Not they; they'll know we're ready for them now."

Squire was right; not till next day did we get news of how in Hamwold Village the gag was taken from Hickin, how he fell on Sandys with raging words, how the infuriated Sandys was near to running him through with his sword.

If there was any talk of a return nothing came of it. For two hours we were on the look-out, many of the men arming themselves with stout sticks and scythes and pitch-forks, while the squire fetched two pistols, one of which he gave to me.

That evening in the kitchen at Splicing Oaks, Will went through his adventure again for the tremulous enjoyment of mother and Joan, and the open delight of Lizzie Barton.

"Hickin won't come to Eastry any more, not he. Learned his lesson this time. Cost him something too. I got a guinea out of his pocket while we were rolling on the ground."

"You took his money?"

"I reckon what I done was worth a guinea," said the aggrieved Will.

"Let him alone, Geoffrey," said Joan.

"He would have done worse than that when he came here once."

"He wanted to take Splicing Oaks away from us," said my mother; "that's far worse than taking a guinea."

"Look here, Will," said I, "it doesn't matter about his being an enemy. The next time I hear of you taking anything from a man's pocket—what's that you have?"

Will had drawn from his breast a packet of folded letters tied round with a piece of string.

"I took these from his pocket too—I reckon you don't want to see them, Master Geoffrey."

I snatched the letters from him, and carried them to the window. They were to Hickin from Miles Seaton, the Parliament agent at Maidstone, and among them was the copy of a letter Seaton had received from London. They were put together in order of date. I read them as they came.

"Master Hickin,

"The statement you made to me yesterday as to the "malignancy of Geoffrey Neame and his share in the "treachery at Patrixbourne I have forwarded to the "committee at Westminster; also your implications "about Sir Thomas Wilford and the visit of his "daughter to Splicing Oaks Farm. Under press of "public business I cannot on my own responsibility "send troopers to arrest Neame. He is of small "importance compared to other work with which I "have been entrusted; men here are but few and have "been sent to me on specific errands. I have little "scope for discretion.

"Miles Seaton."

" Master Hickin,

" I send with this the copy of a letter I received " from Master Pym. If you will give me a week's " notice of the day on which you wish to act I will " have in readiness some troopers. Should Colonel " Sandys be in Maidstone he will be in command of " them. Please to note carefully the instructions of " Master Pym.

" Miles Seaton."

" Master Miles Seaton at Maidstone from Master " John Pym.

" The yeoman Geoffrey Neame should be brought " to London for examination, though not entirely for " the reasons given by Hickin. The Patrixbourne " calamity was largely the result of blindness in " Hickin, and you will therefore see that a responsible " officer is placed in charge on this occasion. Your " letter about Neame is coincident with approaches " made by a royalist, whom we may call 'G' and " who will be of high usefulness to us. 'G' is " enamoured of the daughter of Sir Thomas Wilford, " with whom he has been some time acquainted, and " there may be an incidental point of interest in the " reputed association of this yeoman with the Wilfords. " Do not harm Neame. I remember hearing the " manner of his father's death, and he may prove to " be a willing helper of the Parliament. Besides, I " wish good standing with the yeomen, wherever it " can be made possible. I write about the girl so that " Hickin takes no unwary steps and watches his " tongue.

" John Pym."

So Granville was in love with Cynthia! My eyes must have been as dull as my brain as I folded up the letters.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Joan.

"We must keep a guard on the place all night in case they come back," I said. "A man at the front and back, Will. Change them halfway through so they won't get sleepy. I'll be walking around till midnight."

Long past midnight I was still pacing about the homestead with a gun under my arm and my thoughts were not about Colonel Sandys and his men, but of a gallant young cavalier. The sun was well up before I went in to get a few hours' sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MASTER PYM INTERVENES

WHAT was it to me that Granville should be wooing Cynthia? What interest had I? All along she had been affianced to another. If Herrill's age and worldliness made the alliance seem unnatural, yet there it was as sure as sunrise and to the great desire of both of them. But I knew I was not honest with myself. The gulf between the two, in spite of mutual tenderness, had given me a sense of remoteness and unreality. That their marriage had been so long postponed made it a hazy prospect. In long journeys there are many mishaps, and I knew now that this had established an unworthy and presuming comfort which I had hidden away in a dark corner of my heart.

The tidings that Granville was in love with her came as a thunder-blast. With him there need be no mistiness, no long-distance hopes, for he was the bearer of a distinguished name, and a man of high estate. If Cynthia shared his ardour—who could blame her if the call of youth broke her fealty to Herrill?—why then there would be a swift progression and the early sound of wedding bells.

I had hardened into a practical resolve and was thinking how to carry it out when just two weeks from May Day Stephen Brockman, my mother's cousin, made us an unexpected visit from Dover.

"Fifteen miles is harder for me than fifty used to be, Geoffrey," he said, as he stiffly lifted himself from the saddle.

My mother and Joan had run out to welcome him and he smiled at reproaches for long neglect.

"You people must come to me. Getting muscle-bound. Can I stay the night? Well, I knew I could or I shouldn't be here. Take care of that package in the saddle-bag, Joan. In it is three yards and a half of blue velvet for your mother. Can't sell blue velvet any more. These are days of fustian and leather."

When I went into the kitchen after putting his horse away, I found the old man protesting.

"Very serious," said Joan by way of explanation to me. "Tells us he is here to talk to you on something important and has not seen mother and me for over a year."

"An excuse, mistress. Do you think Geoffrey alone would have brought me?"

But when Stephen Brockman and I were alone together he was suddenly the man of affairs, cutting no words to waste.

"I stirred them up in Dover about this attempt by Hickin on May Day."

"There has been too much stirring at Dover for me."

"Away with peevishness, lad. These Independents are but a handful. Hickin speaks only for two score, or at most three score, at Dover. We go to church, pray for the King, but are strong for Parliament upholding our rights. I gathered a dozen—solid men like myself—and they all knew the Neames, some of them had heard of you. The Mayor was there. They agreed that I should write a letter to Master Pym."

"You wrote to Pym?"

"Why not? Pym is far too wise to offend the citizens of Dover. I am here with his reply."

He took a paper from his pocket, adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and read aloud to me.

" London, May 9.

" Master Brockman,

" These weeks past have seen divers movements in Kent against the Parliament, ill-affected persons, banding together with malicious designs. On April 29, two hundred Kentish gentlemen came wearing swords to London Bridge—which has been but one of many signs of conspiracy. So grave have been some of the menaces that Parliament has ordered the trained bands of London under General Skippon to be ready. This to show you the background of our thoughts.

" We have secured the detention of several individuals, among them Sir William Boteler and Captain Lovelace. We hold, moreover, persons who are suspect or who may give us information. You will not compare these violences with those violences against our liberties which we have suffered and from which we seek to escape. The kingdom is distracted, and every day worsened by the obduracies of those in high places, and we cannot avoid here and there an irregularity, a seeming hardship, while we have no power to read men's minds and while wolves take on sheep's clothing. Be sure we mean justice.

" Your kinsman, young in years, has been pushed into contact with those who are against us. He is, I am told, fiery and strong-handed. It is the yeomen of England who must in large part decide the future. With your words before me I regret that I consented to his seizure. I think for his own sake as well as my requirements that he should see me. Advise him of his own

will to journey to London. He may ask for me at my home in King Street, Westminster.

" For your information I give you and our friends at Dover my fears that open strife may come. I have laboured long and diligently for true communion between King and Parliament. Seduced by wicked counsel, the King seems to intend a war against the Parliament.

" John Pym."

" Ascertain for our guidance if you can the strength of the garrison at Dover Castle, also the amount of ammunition stored therein."

Steeped in my own concerns as I was I could not fail to be stirred by Pym's concluding sentences. Stephen Brockman strengthened them.

" I said we prayed for the King; how long we shall do so I know not. Parliament has already intercepted his desire to seize the magazine at Hull in the North of England. Three weeks ago the King went to the city with some of his nobles and demanded entrance. Sir John Hotham, there for the Parliament, shut the gates against him, and from the top of the wall he entreated the King not to command that which without breach of trust he could not obey."

" Rebellion! "

" Yes, and the Parliament justified it."

Stephen Brockman folded up Pym's letter and put it back in his pocket.

" Cousin," I said, " I had already been building up an intention."

" In what direction? "

" I was already thinking of visiting Master Pym."

Stephen Brockman narrowed his eyes to look at me.

" You were to take risks."

" No greater than those I find in peaceful Eastry."

" You will go in friendly fashion, Geoffrey? " said the old man.

" Like as not, if I bring my mind to visit him, 'twill be to offer to fight for the Parliament."

" Pray God there will be no fighting. The King may be given wisdom in time. He cannot be blind, utterly blind. Accounts say that Master Pym is a very moderate and a far-seeing man. A dozen times we have heard that he desires peace and is working for it."

Two weeks after Stephen Brockman had been to us I sent a letter by carrier to Pym telling him of my intention to come to Westminster; and a week later I started on a ride which was to settle my fate. I went off amid blessings and tears of my mother.

" Come back without any fighting, Geoffrey."

Joan clung to my stirrup as she wished me God-speed and a happy issue.

" Give her my love," she whispered.

I made a steady two days' journey up through Kent and did not fail to note the signs of the times in the villages and towns. Never a blacksmith's forge but was ringing with activity, and I knew it was pike-heads and not horse-shoes that kept the fires alight till late at night. I heard the sound of grindstones with a shiver. The inns were overflowing, with a babel of talk in the tap rooms. Farmers who had come in for the news, shopkeepers with rumours to exchange, dealers who had horses to sell, were mingled with travellers, men in leather coats, anxious for a quick meal and a bait for their mounts, young gallants with grooms at their heels, messengers from the great families (stewards or their kind), pedlars loudly pushing

their wares, and now and again an inflamed Independent who cared not who heard his prophecies and denunciations.

Just before reaching Sittingbourne I saw in the park of a mansion a score or more of men drawn up in line, and half-a-dozen on horses, and I heard they were servants and retainers of the squire who were being fitted out for service with the King. It was a glimpse of that devotion which was to make the task of Pym and those who followed him a drawn-out tragedy of blood and sacrifice.

Noon was striking on the second day from Eastry when I reached the London Bridge—of which I had heard so much, and indeed it was a wondrous sight with its shops, its crush of people, its tumult and noise, and the water rolling on to the sea beneath it all. Thence westwards I passed through a panorama—medleys of traffic and a jostling unending crowd, the din of which was pierced by the loud voices of tradesmen in front of their shops urging purchasers. I saw carts of a fashion strange to me, and at St. Paul's Churchyard I had my first sight of a Sedan chair, the new mode of conveyance for gentlefolk. On leaving Fleet Street I was in the main road for Charing Cross, and there were mansions on my left with gardens running down towards the river, the habitations of great nobles. Altogether, a rare harvest of imagination for one from the country who had read books and talked with travellers. Yet was I only vaguely moved by it all. The thrill I had was that this great city of marvels housed Cynthia Wilford. I had reflected that I must be within walking distance of her.

"The Three Tobacco Pipes" to which I had been recommended by Stephen Brockman was a large and busy inn at Charing Village quite near to the royal palace of Whitehall and within a few hundred yards of West-

minster. I stabled my horse and, observing that the ostler and his boy were over-busy, having a dozen animals to look after, I rubbed him down myself, bedded him with clean straw and gave him a supply of oats.

After I had made a meal in the inn I went forth to seek my interview with Master Pym, making sure beforehand that Stephen Brockman's letter was safely in my breast pocket. Master Pym's dwelling was of moderate size, with the front door giving straight on to the roadway—not nearly so spacious as our house at Splicing Oaks. The door was opened by a plainly-dressed young man of soft speech whom I judged to be a secretary and who answered me courteously as he took my letter.

" Master Pym is in counsel with friends, and I fear the hour is inopportune. Will you enter? "

I stepped into what I thought might be the parlour, but which was in fact a room for receiving visitors, with a polished oak floor, two or three high-backed chairs and a small table with pens and paper on it. The young servitor went upstairs with my letter, and while he was gone I had time to realise that my nerves were fluttering a little at the prospect of facing Master Pym, " King Pym " as his enemies called him. I had no fear, only a trifle of excitement, and what stranger like myself could have failed of it seeing that the man I sought had at that day more of actual power in the ruling of England than the King himself? My expectancy was wasted. In a minute or two the secretary returned with a gracious word of apology. Master Pym was deeply engaged; would I return at ten o'clock on the morrow morning when he would be pleased to see me?

I walked back to the inn and obtained guidance from the ostler as to the whereabouts of Covent Garden, found it to be near at hand and turned my steps thitherwards.

Covent Garden was the site of a new square lying to the north of the Strand, and there were grand houses round it, and it was from a servant carrying a box of oranges that I learnt which was the residence of the Eures. Stone-fronted, with a dozen windows and steps to the big door, it lay on the east side. I made guesses as to which was Cynthia's room.

For an hour and a half I loitered round the square and during my vigil I saw a gaily-dressed young man go to the house. He came out fifteen minutes later with a companion, and the two of them talking together disappeared on the way to the Strand. I fretted for some other sign of life from the house, but none came. Cynthia might have been a thousand miles away for any hint I had of her.

After a late supper at the inn I took a look into the stables to see that the comfort of the roan had been attended to and then I mounted to my room. I had had a tiring day, my usual bed-time was long since past, and yet when I had pulled off my boots I found that sleep was not near me. I sat awhile and then had a feeling to go forth again. That silent house where Cynthia lived drew me: I wanted to see it and be near her, and the very walls that sheltered her had a fascination for me. Call it foolishness; it was a sweet and happy foolishness; I would not barter the recollection of it for all the wisdom there is.

With cloak over shoulders I went out to the streets which were pin-pricked with the lanterns of pedestrians, and here and there showed a cavern of light made by the torches of servants in attendance on groups large or small. I was in the neighbourhood of the Palace, with many noble families resident thereabout, and gaiety was not extinguished by the absence of the King nor by the proximity of Parliament.

In Covent Garden candles were to be seen in some of the houses, including that of the Eures, and as I stood in the gloom in the middle of the square I asked myself why I had not bolstered my courage and knocked at the door in the daylight. Cynthia would not have failed with a welcome; Splicing Oaks was recent in her memory and I had reason to make enquiries of her for mother and Joan. At that late hour, however, I must satisfy myself with the outline of the haven where she rested and with my dreams. Thank heaven there was the morrow!

At the end of an hour, tender with the thought of her whom I imagined to be peacefully sleeping, and full of hope for the coming day, I was preparing to depart when a group entered the square apparently returning from some masque or other entertainment. Two chairs bearing ladies came one behind the other, and by the light of a torch in the hands of a footman I saw three extravagantly dressed young men laughing and talking as they walked beside the ladies. The little procession stopped in front of the Eures' house. My heart was beating fast as the chairs were opened and the ladies handed out. A moment later all the life went out of me. The light shone in the faces of the people as they stood at the foot of the steps exchanging good-byes. Cynthia was radiant with her silken gown, her gleaming ringlets and her necklet of pearls; and merriment was in her eyes as she gave her hand to Granville. He bent over it and then he drew her away from the others up the steps towards the door.

Next morning, with a firm mind, I went to see Master Pym. The King's opponent was not a pretentious figure, not even an imposing one, at first sight. He had broad-set thoughtful eyes, an aquiline nose, close-clipped lips half hidden by a small moustache, and his chin was cleanly chiselled. Thick hard hair fell over a snow-white

collar and his doublet of rich material was plainly cut and unornamented. A pleasant word about my long journey, a motion of his hand to a chair, a friendly light in his eyes —I might have been in Parson Blechynden's study at Eastry.

"I am pleased you have chosen to come to London, Master Neame. I know it is a busy season on the land."

"Your letter to my mother's cousin found me already with half a mind to come."

"I am glad. I have a question to ask you. Will you tell me, Master Neame, what caused you to wreck the business at Patrixbourne?"

I felt my colour rise.

"You knew about that?"

"Why, some would say that it was my main reason, together with your devotion to the Wilford family, for thinking you might be inconvenient."

He smiled as he said it and my thoughts were all adrift, for this was a new kind of man to me altogether.

"I am only a farmer——"

"There lies my reason for this few minutes with you, Master Neame, and not any thought of retribution on an impassioned young man trying to save a girl. I know about it all although I asked the question. You made a heavy stroke at us. What I wish to know—and I am already certain of the answer I shall have—is that what you did was out of no enmity to our cause, and that I may rest satisfied as to the future."

"I am but a yeoman."

Pym leaned forward across the table towards me.

"You yeomen are England. I see every one of you that I can. But you are something more than a yeoman after Stephen Brockman's letter. I must be guided by local advice in fifty—a hundred—instances. I know

your standing. Men such as you are worth a regiment: that is why I now ask you, shortly enough I fear, whether you are committed to the Wilford family. Sir Thomas Wilford is an antagonist of note. This girl, Mistress Wilford——"

"We took care of her. She was grateful but I am naught to her or her people. I am not bound in any way."

"That is good news. I would like to feel that you and those whom you may influence will believe that the Parliament seeks only liberty and prosperousness for those on the land."

"I have some soreness at my treatment."

"You will dismiss it. I need not tell you the difficulties and the confusions."

I nodded my head, for he was convincing me as much by his manner as by his words.

"We have to look forward to war, Master Neame."

"I pray not."

"I also have prayed but vainly. The King intends war on the Parliament and if he is successful this country is crushed to servitude for generations. We are preparing to hurl back the assault; the common people are banding together, a good many of the gentry are arming themselves on our side, money and treasure are pouring in for our help. Three parts of the nation—more than that—are with us and yet, however certain the end may be, disaster may envelop us at the start and for some time to come. The King has nearly all the experienced soldiers on his side; commanders who have learnt their trade in foreign fields. We have a few. Every additional one is priceless to us. A certain cavalier, among the ablest of the King's commanders, wishes to join us. I look upon his assistance as of import. It is no secret that he is enamoured of Mistress Wilford."

He looked at me questioningly.

"What is that to me?" I asked.

"I do not know," said Pym.

I laughed aloud, somewhat rudely.

"You do me too much honour, Master Pym."

"I am no longer young, but I am not ignorant of the human heart. I have met this Mistress Wilford. She may be romantically fond of her rescuing young giant; there are even rumours to that effect."

"That cannot be," I gasped. "Moreover, I have proof she likes this other man."

"You relieve me. All this was incidental, the larger part was to know that you were loyal."

He rose from his seat.

"East Kent will be proud of you, Master Neame. Great work awaits you and men like you."

I was dazed by what I had heard, and I stammered out:—

"This man, this Granville——"

"Granville?" he began, and then from below stairs there arose a commotion, the sound of heated words. Pym walked to the door to meet his secretary on the landing, and the young man's words in an undertone I could not hear properly. Then Pym said: "His hour is but now due. He must wait a little. Let me not be interrupted again."

He turned to walk back to me.

"You spoke of Granville?"

Then he stopped again as the noise of a renewed scuffle came up to us, the banging of a door, and after that the tread of a man on the stairs. Pym pointed to a tall oak screen in a corner of the room. I had just time to step behind it before the newcomer tramped heavily into the room.

"An intrusion, surely?" said Pym quietly.

"I am not accustomed to laggard appointments, Master Pym."

The deep voice in which these words were uttered was that of Colonel Goring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GRANVILLE AND CYNTHIA

THAT Goring should be in communication with Pym was so engulfing a surprise that I almost forgot the hatred and loathing of the man which was part of me. Goring, one of the King's leading spirits, Pym, the King's enemy—what could be the nature of their friendship? And even as I asked the question the blazing answer was upon me. I wonder they did not hear the intake of my breath.

"My study is not a castle to be carried by storm, Colonel Goring. I beg you to remember it."

"Amends if you need them, Master Pym, but I too wish for a measure of respect. Yesterday morning when I came you could not see me. Last evening Lady Suffolk, whether in banter or not, said gossip was strong that Parliament made a catspaw of me. On my way here less than an hour ago I came upon Hollis near the Tilt Yard, and essayed a word of civility with him, whereupon he speaks with a crust. 'The morning is a fine one,' says he, and passes on. Arriving here at the hour set by yourself I am told by a scrivener to await your pleasure. Is my temper so imperfect?"

"You are ruffled without cause, Colonel Goring. Suspicion and tittle-tattle, they are our daily ills in these times. I suffer them myself. As for my delays, discharge me if you will from discourtesy. Hourly I meet emergencies; I have relied on your good understanding of these things."

" I'm no lambkin. But I came up your stairs ready to break, and see you no more."

Pym replied slowly, but with decision:

" That would have been a loss to the nation."

" The matter proceeds? "

" Most of the committee welcome your adhesion heartily. Hollis and one or two others are distrustful—they wish safeguards; 'tis but over-caution."

" I, too, have my qualms. I must be given surety as to my position. I'll have no dung-hill captains lording me."

" We would not waste your qualities. Are we such fools? "

" Again while I know the depth of feeling in the country I am ignorant of your dispositions."

" You shall help to make them."

" Nay, Master Pym, there must be a foundation. What is it? A thousand men of influence from Northumberland to Devon hold their hands. The King reckons on most of them. Is he deluded? You have a list, I warrant, with every one appraised."

" Our strength among the gentry grows each day. Those doubtful and undecided join us three to every one that goes north for the King."

" Who are they? Can I see the names? "

" The names rest in the keeping of Speaker Lenthall in Parliament."

" They are important. What of foot and horse? Is there any tabulation? "

" An overplus rather than a scarcity. We have as you know taken power for the militia."

" Which the King meets with his commissions of array. Both sides will have a rabble except with proper ordering and training."

" Our men come willingly, gladly, not as the King's.

Kent, Surrey, Sussex and Hampshire are raising between them a force of three thousand foot and three hundred horse. I have figures from other districts also."

I heard the opening and shutting of a drawer, the rustle of papers, and after a minute's silence Goring said:

"If these promises are solid, you have a large army."

"Such is our anticipation."

"And yet success will be afar off."

"We take to heart the necessity for careful ordinances and the skilled moulding of the regiments."

"That is where the King has the better. If he is only wise enough to use his advantages you may be swept away. Around him are tried commanders, a hundred of them, experienced in many fields."

"We also have some good soldiers though they are not so many."

"You have four and four only."

"A low reckoning, Colonel Goring."

"Of those four, not one is likely to lead your army to final victory. You will test them I have no doubt. I ask the Parliament to give me a separate command with independent authority; within two months they will make me Captain General of the Forces."

"You are a bold prophet."

"I give you the fruit of knowledge. I grant you that the four are stout men—I do not drag in the faint-heart, Lord Holland. You rely first on the Earl of Essex. Essex served in the Palatinate. Three years ago against the Scots he did nothing. Essex is huffed with the King, and though he has worked with you for many months he is a Royalist at heart. He will bend under the strain. Of the others Philip Skippon is a good soldier in attack, but he has little beyond immediacy. At Breda he drove off two hundred Spaniards by push of pike with thirty Eng-

lish. That does not qualify him for Captain General. There is Fairfax—he did his duty under Vere across the water, but nothing more, and bravery will not take the place of brains. Lastly Waller. You must have a younger man than Waller. He was in the Venetian war, and twenty years have passed since he was in the Low Countries. What of him since then? These are your four. Master Pym, you take great chances against such men as Astley, Lindsey, Culpepper, Wilmot, Hopton, Wilford, Digby, Ruthven and Prince Rupert, to name but some. The King has his choice of high capacity."

"This tends in one direction, Colonel Goring."

"I would bring you at least the equal of any I have named, but mistake me not, I do not press myself. I have my hesitancies, I make no pleadings with suspicious men. Hollis and his friends, what say they?"

"They doubt your steadfastness in the cause of the Parliament."

"Only a few months since I brought to your ears, Master Pym, the news of the army plot to march on London during Strafford's trial, and I was warmly thanked by the Parliament. Was I doubted then?"

"Since that you have served the King again."

"Who has not served the King? Who has not had hope, this month or that month, he would be wise at last? The scales are now from my eyes for good. Are you sure they have fallen from some the Parliament hold in high honour? Essex himself—Essex has declared in my hearing that though he thinks the King wrong he will always hold the person of his Majesty as sacred. And Essex is what you call a godly man. I hold with no such nonsense."

"Talk is of a new estrangement between you and Charles."

"You voice the matter with too much delicacy. The Court, or the ragged fringe of it remaining in London, rings with the story of how the King reproved me. Behind my back they gloat. I was left at Dover to punish two men—in your employ, I suppose, Master Pym—who tried to take the Crown jewels which the Queen had in her custody for pawning overseas. A plain case for hanging. I had them before me at the Castle when in burst Wilford, young Granville, Tom Verney and some other bravos and took them from me, because, forsooth, Wilford's daughter, an attractive wench, had feeling for one or both of the night riders. I go to the King and so does Wilford, and the upshot is a petulant censure for me, to all intents a public whipping, as a result of doing that to which I had been enjoined by his royal sign manual. Conceive the man! You have evidence of his love of opposition. A child in a royal gown. He listens to some tale of this Wilford girl and I am forthwith chided as unvirtuous. Mark me, his prudery will fly when swords are drawn. At the first sound of your drums and trumpets, I shall be summoned to his counsel."

"It is the way of such men. His discomposure serves a purpose."

"You have heard the current chatter. I give you the discounting of the bolstered trifle. It's hardly worth your hearing. This girl of Wilford's is a dainty piece, with airs of her own. I am no canting pretender, nor any saint. A compliment or two, the tossing of a pretty head, some attention pressed on her with due rebuffing, and I am finished. Not so much as a kiss forced from her. She flies frightened of me: a vain little thing. Tears with her fears. This wicked Goring! How narrow an escape! And so our righteous King delivers me his lecture."

" A matter for your convenience and conscience. You will not expect my indignation. We may pass on."

" There is a recent sequel. Sir Thomas Wilford and his friends are sworn against me. A known comrade of mine, Colonel Lyall, recently went North to join the King, and Wilford at first sight of him strikes his face with a glove."

" When was this? "

" A week ago. I had word from Lyall yesterday. They met, Lyall ran Wilford through the breast. If not dead, he is near it. Have you rats behind your wainscot? "

" 'Tis nothing. My secretary takes books to the adjoining room. This news has gravity for you, Colonel Goring."

" So much gravity that I leave for employment across the sea unless a fitting offer comes to me from the Parliament. They will say I planned it."

" I am sorry for the girl."

" Of late she has seen little of her father, and she has youth's ardours. Have you not heard of Granville's conquest? I'm told the wench is bewitched by him. What's a father against a lover's love? "

" I fear that you and I think some different thoughts, Colonel Goring. We wander from our ground. Mistress Wilford's fate need not detain us. She finds protection and a good match in Granville."

" A match ! " sneered Goring. " Granville will make no match with her. He has no need. When does your Committee——"

" You foul liar," I roared, and the oak screen went over with a force that broke it, and I was on Goring as he sat facing Pym, and hit him with the flat of my hand. Chair and he crashed to the floor, with myself on top fumbling

for his throat. He was of much strength and quickness and he had me by the thigh and half twisted me and thus he managed to draw a dagger. I had the luck to catch his wrist. We were contortioned, straining, I was slowly putting him backwards when Pym's voice broke in. He was standing two yards away from us with a pistol in each hand.

"Release him, Neame!"

I loosened my hold, and as I did so Goring made a jab at me with his weapon. I dodged it and jumped to my feet. Goring scrambled up, his finery in disarray; he eyed me like a boar at bay. Pym was speaking in a deep voice.

"I put a bullet through the one of you who moves first against the other. Neame, stand back against the door."

"Is this the way you trap your visitors?" snarled Goring.

"He is one of the men you tried to hang, and was in the room when you came up. I intended to dismiss him, but you gave me no opportunity. You shall have the story."

Pym turned to me.

"You are a wild bull, Neame. You have injured yourself by this outbreak."

He placed one of his pistols on the table and took up a whistle.

"You will give me your word to see me here at six tomorrow evening."

"This carrion——" I began, pointing to Goring.

"Your promise or I issue an order for your detention."

"Yes, I'll come," I cried, shaking with passion. "I have something to say——"

"Go now," said Pym coldly.

I went out, clumsy of foot, and such was my condition that on getting to the street, with strange houses and shops around me, I had a moment of wonderment as to where I was. My mind and temper cleared as I walked northwards along King Street. I must go to Pym again next day—I settled myself on that. I cared not for his threats, but I needed further light. Whither my talk with him would lead I knew not, but I would see Cynthia in the meanwhile. Alackaday, I might soon find myself on the road back to Splicing Oaks with nought but the farm to think about in the future. I had a disappointed young man's sense of insignificance, and heavy with the thought of Granville I came within sight of " The Three Tobacco Pipes."

And then at the inn, indeed before I reached it, I found fate in ambuscade. A man with bristling moustache and twinkling blue eyes and with the dust of recent riding on his boots turned the corner of the stable yard as I made for the front of the building. He stopped, and took a good look at me.

" Master Geoffrey Neame? "

" Yes, who are you? "

" Who am I! " He twisted the end of his moustache and weighed me. " So you're the cock that fights. Perhaps lacking a touch of manners——"

" You are a stranger, and I have much to occupy my thoughts."

" So! Well, here's your answer. I am Colonel Peter Styles—at this moment, and for two weeks past nominated to command a regiment of foot (not yet drawn together) under His Majesty the King at York in the north of England."

" I mean you no discourtesy, but——"

" I might not even be a soldier at all! Well, that's true

too. A colonel with a regiment in the air requires credentials. You shall have them, Master Neame, without great loss of time and from friends of yours. I come to you with news from Wilford."

"Sir Thomas Wilford. He is alive—well?"

"Alive, yes, his well-being a question of degree."

"Are you a friend of his?"

"Worthy young man, I see you are of those who require a full and proper introduction to all and sundry before you'll speak them kindly—a trait which will lose you much enjoyment and will not always advance your knowledge. Suspicion is a two-edged sword. But if 'twill sweeten you, I must put aside a temperamental modesty. You would not have asked a presentation to the name of Peter Styles if you had been around the court in London some fifteen years ago—a young fool parting with his money, and acquiring useless habits. In 1629 I trailed a pike with Wilford at the siege of Bois le Duc——"

"If you are a friend of Sir Thomas Wilford, it is enough."

"Then let us to the inn for dinner, we draw attention here."

When we were seated at the table, I felt compunctions at the abruptness I had shown and excused myself, and Colonel Styles looked me over steadily with half a smile in his eyes.

"Any friend of Sir Thomas Wilford is surely welcome to me now," I said; "my difficulty in London is to tell friends from enemies."

"I dined and drank with Wilford here in town when you were clinging to your mother's kirtle."

"You were with him in the wars abroad?"

"With him and without him. He was still fighting

the Spaniards when I joined Gustavus Adolphus under Mackay. 'Tis too long a story for the hour. You have before you, young man, one who had his captaincy at Leipsic and led a regiment at the forcing of Lech on the Danube—which means less to you, I swear, than the price of calves or the thatching of a wheat rick. Besides I see the questions on your face. If broken fortune had not followed me this last year or two, I doubt if news of coming conflict in England would have drawn me back to join my old comrade in arms, who, I say it frankly, at present bears my charges till his sacred Majesty's exchequer shall be in better shape. At present you may behold me with dust in my throat as well as on my clothes, a little on the hungered side, having ridden at haste to a farm in Kent in search of a yeoman named Neame who, twenty-four hours before, had left for London."

"You have been to Splicing Oaks?"

"I brought a letter from Wilford to his daughter, also one to Sir Edward Granville. You were mentioned."

"Sir Thomas Wilford is able to write a letter?"

"Why not? He lies at York, pricked beneath the shoulder, minus a lot of blood, but will be on his feet again in a week. The secret of it all is Wilford's long cup-hilted rapier against the short French weapon with a nimble French-instructed man behind it. Lyall was the fellow's name. He was with Goring in the Low Countries. I had heard of him from Munro who was in the French King's guard and who described him as a man of parts. He went to Paris with a woman, the wife of some poor devil here in England, was one of those who did intriguing work for Richelieu; he carried good introductions. Even then he had some knowledge of the slighter weapon."

"Where is he now?"

"In disgrace, if not under arrest. Charles is annoyed, holds the newcomer must have been to blame. Yet Wilford began the business—I was there. He and I were walking up and down on the green one morning while he explained the mismanagements of our royal master in regard to this approaching commotion, when we see Lyall passing us on foot. 'That man,' he splutters. He steps across, slashes Lyall over the mouth with his glove. Out came their blades. The end of it as you have heard."

"Did Wilford give no reasons afterwards?"

"Not he. He lies in bed and scrawls a line to his daughter and to Granville. 'Fetch Cynthia here, Peter. Granville may be able to come with her. If not go to Kent for a young giant of a farmer. They'll know who. I'd rather there were two than one to bring her hither. Endymion Porter will get you leave of absence from the King.' Wilford thinks he's going to die like many a strong healthy man with a flesh wound. The surgeon gave me enlightenment with smiles at Wilford's trepidation. The surgeon did not comprehend that Wilford feared not death, but, for reasons unknown, feared for his daughter. I came south without more ado. That is the story."

"I have something to add, Colonel Styles. But here is our dinner."

An hour or more was taken up that afternoon by my recital, interspersed by question and answer. I kept nothing back and I found swiftness of understanding in this lean and jaunty man at arms.

"Some small portion of your story I have had from Granville and the girl. I would that Wilford had told me more."

"Goring no longer pursues Mistress Wilford. We are relieved in that."

" Are we? When you know Goring as well as I you will walk with circumspection. An incalculable man."

" Should I not go to Mistress Wilford? "

" You cannot make too much haste."

I walked to Covent Garden with Peter Styles, comforted that I had a mission, strengthened by my companion's spirit and yet with unsteady nerves. I had to meet a changed Cynthia. What would she look like? Would she laugh as she used to do? I remembered how she would run to meet me outside the stables. I dreaded the transformation I was to witness, tried to harden myself to face it. Granville was now between us. He had great gifts, that young man, a magic touch. What a lout I must appear beside him!

Within the doorway of the Eure home, while a servant went upstairs with our names, Peter Styles strolled to examine two Elizabethan pikes fastened against the wall, and I stood with my hat under my arm looking like the yokel that I was.

Will there ever be such a moment in my life as when Cynthia came flying down the stairs to meet me, with her little curls all awry over her forehead, with eyes dancing, with both hands thrown out, crying:

" Oh Geoffrey, Geoffrey, you have come."

My world was upside down. Her two tiny hands were buried in one of mine as she twinkled her feet up and down in her joy. I couldn't speak; I gulped down something in my throat.

" I thought you had forgotten me; not a word, not a sign."

Heaven knows what I tried to mutter; I was just a great dumb awkward creature.

" Old friends, I perceive," said Peter Styles as he stood surveying us with arms akimbo.

Cynthia withdrew her hands from me and I said in surprise, "I told you I knew Mistress Wilford."

"You told me something of the kind," he remarked dryly.

I could not understand his intonation, but I saw a flood of colour come slowly to Cynthia; not only her cheeks but her neck was rosy.

Before Peter Styles could say more, steps on the stairs above brought a diversion, and I saw descending to us a lady some ten years older than Cynthia whom I was soon to know as Mistress Eure. A smile went with her quiet voice, and she spoke her welcome to me familiarly as though to an established friend. I found in her at once a hint of that tenderness which had endeared her to Cynthia and made a link between them from thence onward for many years. She took us into a big room on the right with a spread of ancient tapestry on one side of it, and Vandyck's picture of Sir Edmund Verney on the wall facing the window. We sat in high-backed chairs and while we talked together a servant brought in wine.

"My husband, Colonel Eure, is with the King," said our hostess. "There has been no time for a message from him, I suppose."

"I travelled fast," said Peter Styles; "you may not hear for days, if you hear at all. The matter was hushed."

Cynthia spoke of the letter she had received.

"My father writes that I am to go to him immediately. He gave no reason. He told me to trust Colonel Styles, and said he hoped Sir Edward Granville, or Master Neame would be able to come with me."

"Granville must stay in London," said Peter Styles, "I have talked with him. Westminster is big with events. He represents more than himself."

" Here he is," said Mistress Eure who was seated near the window.

Granville came in with the springy gait I remembered so well, and he was as keen as his own rapier, though more serious than I had known him.

" Master Neame, this is good."

" I was in London on my own affairs," I replied.

" On your own affairs? "

Thereupon I told him and the others my experiences, describing what happened on May Day, making strong my indignation, while not omitting my desire to ascertain how Cynthia fared. I said nothing of the letter " G " in Pym's letter, played lightly on the visit of Stephen Brockman and his missive from Westminster. I told in detail of the interview in King Street and the intervention of Goring, with the exception that I slurred the reference to Granville and explained my attack on Goring by his careless reference to Cynthia's gaiety. The excuse for my violence seemed flimsy enough as I gave it.

Granville watched me grimly; I do not believe he was much deceived. As for Peter Styles he twirled his moustache, and there was a gleam of humorous surprise in his eye as if he were enjoying another aspect of me.

" Where does Goring conceal himself? " burst out Granville. " He sees Hollis, Pym and the rest. He talks with Lady Suffolk. How and when? We never sight the man."

" Goring was always for underground work," said Styles.

" I have an account to settle with him," snapped Granville viciously.

" I fail to see why your father wishes you with him, Cynthia," said Mrs. Eure.

Styles nodded.

" 'Tis my blind spot."

" No mystery about it," said Granville. " We have heard from Master Neame the imminence of war. Some among us here in London rise each morning now half expecting the upheaval will come before the evening. Sir Thomas Wilford at the King's side must be specially informed. When war is announced London, overwhelmingly for the Parliament, will be no place for Royalists, be they men or women. There will be a wholesale seizure. Those untouched at the offset will be surrounded by a hundred dangers, dangers on their doorsteps, within the very walls of their homes. Sir Thomas Wilford has no doubt been deciding for weeks to have Mistress Wilford with him. He is suddenly disabled. He sends for his daughter without delay. One may discern his anxieties."

" Right sound reasoning," said Peter Styles; " Wilford is an old campaigner."

" In the overturning here Goring might find opportunity for further persecution of Mistress Wilford," I remarked.

" 'Twas in my mind," said Granville.

" Cynthia could come with me to my house in Leicestershire," suggested Mistress Eure.

Granville shook his head. " Goring will soon find his way to Leicestershire."

We talked backwards and forwards and all the while I was thinking of what I saw in Granville. His occasional merriment with Cynthia had a softness behind it. His eyes filled with a smile at any word from her. His voice was different when he spoke to her and he did not know it. He bit his underlip and gazed at her intensely when she brought up Goring's name. Once he was the gay quipster of old with fluent fancies breaking from him,

and he was aflame at Cynthia's interest and delight. I noticed that at the slightest word from her in our discussions he would become very quiet and gentle. I had not imagined he could be so earnest, so considerate.

Notwithstanding that I had mistaken the "G" of Goring for the "G" of Granville, my heart had spoken truly at Splicing Oaks. How could I fail to read him? Was I not in love myself? I had envy but not hatred for he was a proper figure of a man. It seemed against sense that Cynthia should not be drawn by him, and whatever her immediate feelings, I could see but one end. Poor Herrill! I could wish there had not been that flaw in Granville—though who was I to condemn him! He was winning Cynthia's love while Herrill was distant. He took the girl at a disadvantage surely, and was making a blow at a man who could not help himself.

"Then we hold from a plan till Master Neame has seen Pym?" said Peter Styles.

"After that, Geoffrey, will you come with Colonel Styles and me to Yorkshire?"

Cynthia was smiling towards me.

"If I am needed. But Sir Edward Granville——"

"He is busy here. Plots, high politics, what you will."

"Why I cannot journey with Mistress Wilford to the north," said Granville addressing me, "is because I leave London this evening to fetch the man who above all others ought to be with her now. I go to France to tell Master Herrill the situation. You may be certain he will return with me."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I MAKE A CHOICE

NEXT morning Peter Styles went out by himself, and was away a couple of hours or more engaged, he said, on a ramble to old haunts in the hope of coming across a friend or two of by-gone years. " We have our sentiments, we soldiers. I may mix some usefulness with the indulgence."

He came back after dinner with a variety of gossip and fragments of information, and a discovery touching ourselves.

" 'Twas too early an hour for much stir in the inns except for merchandisers, and other dull busy persons who make up for light drinking by heavy eating. ' The Golden Fleece ' just below here where first I went was nigh empty. I might have known it. Cheeriness begins with candle-light in ' The Golden Fleece.' The drawers were still rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

" I turned about for London and at ' The Mitre ' in Fleet Street I had a sense of home with old John Westerham, jolly as ever, remembering me at the first glint, bringing a flagon for himself and for me to the table near the fireplace, where I have lost many a guinea at dice in the old times. John had to hear my news (given with discretion) and then I asked him about the people I used to know, some dead, some scattered. Fifteen years makes a difference. He saw little of the nobles, he said, but heard rumours that Lord Holland competed with Lord Essex for favour with the Parliament as a military leader, and

talk was that half of the great people knew not which side to join. London citizens were swarming for the Parliament and Skippon was training seven thousand men. An earthen rampart flanked with bastions and redoubts was being built to protect the city.

"I went on to 'The Windmill' in Old Jewry, where an amiable question of the host, a youngish man, drew curt reply and a morsel of suspicion. I'll warrant the fellow was a fanatic. I gave him a hard word and left before there was trouble. But once outside I turned the corner into the yard and had the satisfaction to find there grey haired Jim, the ostler, active under his years and wanting but a minute to recall me. From him I had sundry scraps —the great call for horses, the hatred of the bishops, the good money being gained by smiths and saddlers, Skippon's order against soldiers' oaths. But not a word of help for us in our work of the next day or two.

"On my way back I walked in the garden of Lincoln's Inn and found it near deserted. But my morning was not to be a blank one after all. On turning into the Strand I almost ran against Will Fordley, son of old Sir Naylor Fordley of Hexham in Northumberland. Will, but a week from Holland, was buying a horse a headpiece and taslets ready for the north. We had a glut of talk together.

"'The second old friend in twenty-four hours,' he said. 'Yesterday, in King Street I came face to face with Goring. Was with him against the Spaniards. What do you here?' I asked. Goring put his finger to his lip. 'Work which is not to be spoken of. When you get to York tell Culpepper all goes well. Let him convey it to the King.' No more could I get from him. I take his message north to-night. Will Fordley was always faithful and thickheaded; we were boys together. Heaven

knows the meaning of Goring's mysterious message; probably nothing! Will was inquisitive I suppose and had to be diverted. He learned that Goring's lodging was in St. Martin's Lane."

"News for Granville!"

"Look not so far ahead, Master Neame; Granville must take his chance. We have our own perplexities. With us 'tis hours not days."

"I have no fear of Master Pym."

"Only old soldiers like me can afford to be afraid. Listen, my cockerel—who in this city has reason to watch us?"

"To watch us!"

"Yesterday as we started back from Covent Garden I noticed two men in good sober dress observing us from across the square. When we entered 'The Three Tobacco Pipes' they were not twenty yards behind. This morning when I passed on my way back from 'The Golden Fleece,' the same two men were at the inn door, and one tracked me along the Strand. I lost him before I reached 'The Mitre.' I returned an hour ago to find the pair of them on guard in a doorway opposite. I went across to challenge them and they bolted like rabbits. That's not the end. I made for the taproom and as I crossed the step I heard our host, Ossulton, declaring that if he had any knowledge he would not give it. 'I do not babble about my guests,' he said with some acidity. He was talking to a sturdy fellow wearing a cloak from beneath which peeped a sword, a man hard bitten by service from which he must have had some profit for his hat and boots were new. He tossed his head and waved his hand as if the matter were of no concern; he drank his pint of ale and swaggered out, passing me without a look. Ossulton cast a sideways glance at him as he disappeared.

" ' You're with this Master Neame? ' he asked me, and I promptly told him you were my nephew, dearer than any son these many years. ' I gave him the way to Master Pym's house yesterday,' said Ossulton, ' and Master Pym's friends are my friends. I'll have no rascally Cavaliers spying in ' The Three Tobacco Pipes.' The fellow wanted to know if Master Neame stayed the night, with would-be jokes as to what room of mine was large enough to allow him bedspace.

" I had some talk with Ossulton, displaying my leanings toward the Parliament, and was given a willing undertaking that we should know of any further questioning."

" The men outside were on a similar quest? "

" You may wager Splicing Oaks on it."

" I know no reason why I should be spied on. Who are they? This was a Cavalier; the men outside were different."

" As for that—many a Cavalier will be wearing a drab coat and droning his pious fervour. I allow the Puritans no less shrewdness. You have little knowledge of war, or preparations for war, Master Neame. I will not even guess the camp from which the men come, only I am quite certain you are the object of a particular and unloving scrutiny."

Peter Styles walked with me to Master Pym's house in King Street that evening, and having caused me to announce him as an old friend of my father's, he made himself at home in a comfortable chair while I mounted the stairs to Pym's study. By the time I was half-way up, Styles had begun telling stories of my boyhood to the secretary.

Pym was seated at his writing-table and he did not rise

as on the previous day when I made my entry. He had a quill in his hand and with it he pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, Master Neame. Have you anything to say?"

"I come here in accordance with my promise."

"You have realised how gross was your behaviour yesterday?"

"I have nothing to regret about Goring, if that is what you mean?"

"Nothing to regret! I think you have much to regret."

We sat looking at each other, he with his brow unwrinkled, with his widely-opened eyes inscrutable, and his lips straight as a line. Gone was the understanding good-natured man of the day before. At length he said:

"You have been to the house of Mistress Eure, and Granville was present. Do you know that Colonel Eure is a bigoted Catholic and is with the King, and that Granville remains in London for a purpose against us?"

"I was there to see Mistress Wilford but it is true I met Mistress Eure and Sir Edward Granville. Our talk was mostly around Colonel Goring."

"I lament it. This dislike for Colonel Goring is injurious to yourself and others."

"Dislike! A fastidious word, Master Pym. What of yourself? Do you continue intimate with the attempted abductor of a young girl and a married man to boot. Is he the person for you to trust?"

Pym was impassive, but I heeded not his quietness and fixed gaze.

"He changes his side as it suits him. Of what use is he to the Parliament? He will sell you to-morrow as readily as he sells the King to-day. You are a judge of

men; you know that. You talk of my 'dislike'! He is a reptile."

When I had finished, Pym, speaking with less sternness than before, said: "I understand your feelings; they are not unwarrantable. But, Master Neame, apart from your stature, you are a boy, and like a boy live in the emotions of the moment. I offer you a phrase or two of explanation though I must be brief, for there are serious proposals about yourself to be entered into before we part. Goring may be a bad man—but he is of value. In the autumn you farmers place manure on the soil of your fields, using its qualities for the production and enrichment of crops in the approaching spring and summer. The pollution of the midden is changed into waving fields of corn. Is that sufficient of an illustration?

"You may well ask if I find satisfaction in intrigue with such a man as Goring? To which I make reply that strong as are your youthful feelings the strongest of all feelings is yet to come. It does not come to all; I think it will to you. The sense of duty is naught to boast about; the very mention of it destroys some of its essence. I speak not of a soldier's duty, but duty without glory, of a responsibility which carries with it revilement, antagonisms and jealousies, to be borne without complaint. Under that impelling force you will suffer much. You will listen to corroding words. You will talk equably with nauseous people. Disgrace may come upon you. Some contentment may be yours from a partial achievement. More likely failure will dog you. But nothing will turn you from your course, for you will be transcended. You young men are moved by love of women and ardour for fighting; they become feathers in the balance. Your reward is within you—not to be described."

There was a glow about the man. He squared himself as though he had gone too far.

"When do you return to your farm?"

"I am uncertain."

"Return at once, Master Neame, and wait until you hear that we need you."

"You take much for granted, Master Pym."

"Am I not to do so?"

"What of Colonel Goring?"

"Colonel Goring!"

"Is he to join you?"

"I hope so."

"Then I'll have no doings with you. A cut-throat and libertine. His cause is not mine. I heard your creed just now: hypocrisy——"

"You go too far, Master Neame," said Pym, rising.

"Hear me," I cried; "I am a young man, but I know right from wrong. You put this renegade, this pestilent——"

"I have given you too much consideration," interrupted Pym. "Leave me, and take warning to control your tongue which otherwise may lead you into trouble. When you have had time for thought you will come to me in another temper."

"Another temper!" I exclaimed. "My temper is firm and settled."

"I will try to forget your words."

"Let me fix them upon you, Master Pym. You take the wickedest man in England; I go on the other side, let it be what it may. I journey back to Kent and whatever a man can do among his neighbours, that I do. Goring to lead in the Parliament's army—— !"

Pym was looking at me abstractedly as one who was afar off.

" I am sorry," he said; " there is no help for it."

He pointed to the door, turned from me and went to his seat at the table.

I found Peter Styles waiting for me in the room below, hat in hand, and when we were outside a dozen yards from Pym's dwelling he said: " I heard you raving at the great man."

" He stands by Goring. I told him that from henceforth I am heart and soul against the Parliament."

" My faith; let me hear the rest."

I gave Styles an account of what had passed.

" You've put the fat in the fire, my young friend."

" I daresay Pym thought I made a fool of myself. He gave me up. His last words were ' There is no help for it.' "

" You thought he was resigned."

" Disgusted perhaps; anxious to get rid of me."

" You should have been startled."

" Startled? "

" Pym speaks slowly, but acts quickly. He always says less than he means."

" He will not dare——"

" Will he not? You won't escape from London unless we are speedy and fortunate. His orders are going forth at this minute."

Peter Styles hesitated in his walk, thought for a moment and then he said: " Can you find your way to the Oxford Road at the corner by Tyburn? You must try. Skirt the royal park then north across the fields, two miles from here, three at most. I go to get our horses at ' The Three Tobacco Pipes.' "

" Let me come with you."

" You're a marked man. Besides I'll move quicker alone. I have a race to get to the inn before Pym's men

reach it. No further parley, lad. Strike for the Oxford Road; I'll be there in an hour or less."

He pointed my direction, and swinging on his heel was gone at a pace which set me an example.

My path across country, owing to my ignorance of the way and consequent divergencies, was longer than it should have been, and a full hour had passed before I came to the Tyburn Corner of the Oxford Road which runs from there straight on to the west while giving birth to a road on the right for the north. Delayed as I had been I was at Tyburn before Styles, and I set myself to wait as composedly as might be. I had had time to become uncomfortable when, as dusk was falling, I was eased to spy behind a hay waggon an oncoming rider with a led horse.

" I feared you were lost," I said as I took the bridle of the roan.

" A plaguey effort. Up with you, lad. We must keep moving for a time."

We turned along the road leading to the north, trotting smartly for the best part of a mile, and then my companion took a lane on the left, and brought his horse to a walk. " This should lead us through the village of Kensington."

" Whither are we bound? "

" That is what we have now to settle. I have been followed. Pym must have been prepared for your tantrums. Near the inn I saw two men on horses and I thought they might be watching the place. I went into the stable yard, sent for Ossulton and paid him our reckoning, and he lent me a hand to saddle the horses. Ecod, I was only just in time. As I reached the road half a file of troopers were at the front door. Off I went eastward along the Strand in case I should be followed, and

well I did so, for after covering a couple of hundred yards, I turned my head and saw one of the two horsemen coming along behind me. The Strand is narrow, the traffic was thick and after passing Temple Bar I bent round into Chancery Lane and lost the fellow. I took no hazard and at the top of Chancery Lane pushed on straight northwards towards Islington before I circled. I had to pick my way from there and I touched the Oxford Road only half a mile from Tyburn. Our question now is north or south for you. North is safer."

"We had better separate. You will be free then to accompany Mistress Wilford."

"And you, my young friend, what of you?"

"I will find a hiding-place in some village—we are surely near one—and will join you and Mistress Wilford once you are away with her from London."

"A hiding place! Something more than a bushel basket of a village is needed. A sight of you is to be remembered, Master Neame. By to-morrow word will have been scattered that you are wanted. Pym and his men are thorough. It is incredible that your whereabouts will not be known if you are in or near London, for you are very noticeable."

"Is Pym so revengeful?"

"Flatter not yourself. A few hot words—Pym! Dismiss the thought. The fact is you are now a nuisance—likely to blundering intrusion on purposes delicately poised. You are mad about Wilford's daughter—quite out of hand. You may do some little mischief in Kent. Pym means to clap you into prison and remove you from harm's way. He intends you no further hurt. Think not he will relax because of your triviality. That is not Pym's way—I have heard of him. You might get clear northwards to-night. I'll wait in some seclusion with an

eye on Mistress Wilford till Granville and Herrill reach London."

"I am a danger to you."

"You add to my complexities about the girl. If you will not leave London——"

"What then?"

"Why then, my queer young man, we shall fight it out together."

"I ought to be thanking you for what you've done already, Colonel Styles."

"Ods, lad, I've been known to desert a cause, but never a comrade. So far as the girl is concerned——"

"I'll be gone to Splicing Oaks and leave her to your care."

"Good sense behind a splashing temper. 'Tis rare. I shall end by an affection for you, Master Neame. Splicing Oaks, you say, but how to get there! Pym's men will be waiting for you at London Bridge. You must go up river at daybreak and cross by one of the fords.

"Should we not ride to-night?"

"More loss than gain. We have no guidance, perhaps bad roads, or none at all and also darkness. Besides a tired horse and man to-morrow is unpolitic. Best make for Chelsea where we can get a room for ourselves and stalls for the horses at 'The Blue Posts' tavern in the King's Road. 'The Blue Posts' is a busy place with much going and coming, westwards and eastwards. Stray travellers cause no remark. We'll be up betimes."

"I'll be hard to wake, I fear."

"I sleep as lightly as I wish. I'll rouse you. The one time I'll be able to handle you roughly."

Eleven o'clock had come by the time we reached "The Blue Posts," a substantial hostelry showing lights below stairs. Two saddle horses in charge of a stable boy, and

a farmer's nag, tied to the iron ring of the water-trough, gave evidence that the hour was not too late for business. Within was liveliness and I wondered when "The Blue Posts" went to rest. As we entered the white-aproned host was carrying foaming mugs to two countrymen, stopping to exchange a joke with a husky, red-faced ferryman. At a table in the corner a drawer was placating a group of noisy traders—such I judged them to be—who having had much drink were indignant that a further supply was not more quickly forthcoming. Two travel-marked men having an appearance of quality sat apart with a bottle of wine between them talking together.

Styles, with a word of good cheer to the landlord, asked if we could have a room and a couple of beds for the night.

"Ye can have a room apiece if you like. Times we haven't one to spare."

"One room will serve," said Styles. "My young friend sleeps heavy. We have to be in Kingston selling horses at ten in the morning. I'll have him by my side."

"As ye wish. Mary! Mary!"

He went to search for his wife in the back of the house, and it was while he was away that a mild uproar arose in the taproom. The party of traders—they were four in number—had belaboured the drawer with their curses, apparently only as a change to loud-mouthed wranglings among themselves, which they resumed as soon as liquor was once more on the way to them. Objurgations of Pym and Hampden, and acclamations of the King, countered by an ejaculatory defence of the Parliament from a fat man, made a great din.

The landlord returned to say his wife would come to conduct us to our room, and he lifted his eyebrows in despair at the shouting in the corner. The fat man,

well gone in drink, could hardly reply to the torments of his friends, and his head was resting on his hands, his eyes half closed.

" I'll wake him," said one of the group, a dark-haired man, with bony face.

Thereupon he began to roll out at the top of his voice a song:

> *" What creature's this, with his short hairs,*
> *His little band, and huge long ears,*
> *That this new faith has founded,*
> *The Puritans were never such,*
> *The Saints themselves had ne'er so much!*
> *Oh, such a knave's a Roundhead."*

The song roused the fat man effectively. He slowly raised his head, and his bleared eyes opened. He reached for the pewter pot at his right hand and brought it down with what drunken force he could muster on to the songster's head. Over went the table, and the four men were in a heap on the brick floor fighting and cursing. The landlord rushed to them to be received with a kick in the stomach which sent him reeling back in our direction. The Royalist who had been struck was kneeling on the fat man, clawing at his face.

" Will no one stop this? " beseeched the landlord, his eye going round the room.

I looked at Styles and he nodded. With a couple of steps I had reached the struggling pile. I pushed away with a heavy hand the two who were swaying about over the fighters, gripped the Royalist and tucked him under my left arm. The fat man feebly struck at me as I lifted him beneath the other.

They kicked and screamed like infants as I carried

them out to the front of the inn and placed them lengthwise in the horse-trough. The taproom occupants, together with the landlord and his wife and two or three servants, had all followed exuberantly to see the fun. Advice to the squirming victims was freely given as I pushed them under the water.

Amid much laughter the two valiants, half-drowned and wholly frightened, climbed out of the trough, shaking themselves and glaring blindly at each other between their spitting and coughing. They went off with their befuddled companions, all the fight soaked out of them.

Back in the taproom I was the centre of admiring words and the offer of drink.

"Bravely done, master," said the landlord; "I would that you had been our guest before."

One of the two travellers who had shared the bottle of wine took off his hat to me.

"Permit me to make my compliments. A feat indeed. Better than a main of cocks. Will you and your friend take a glass of Canary with us?"

"I thank you, sir, but I must to bed. We have to be early astir."

"Buying horses at Kingston at ten in the morning," said Styles.

"Mary," cried the landlord, "a bottle of Schnappes in the bedroom. A nightcap for a gallant lad."

"I thank you, but——"

"We are indebted to you," said Styles. "'Twill induce comfortable slumber if not for the nephew at least for the uncle."

As we went upstairs together he said: "Never refuse good Schnappes; it saved my life more than once in the Low Countries. That fat man was a heavy load."

"I suppose he was; I never noticed it."

Thoroughly tired and with the prospect of less than four hours' rest we lay down in our clothes—Styles giving me assurance that he would not fail to wake me before dawn.

I was asleep almost immediately, and it seemed to me that I had lost myself but a minute, though in reality it was two hours, when I was disturbed by a scuffling noise and a sense of shouting and then I was properly awakened by a shaking and a blow on the chest and I cried out to Styles: "Not so rough." I found I could not move my hands because of a cord round my wrists. "Up with you," came in a gruff voice. I opened my eyes and saw Styles standing in the midst of three or four armed men with his wrists fastened as mine were. The cloaked leader of the party was by my bedside sword in hand; it was with the hilt that he had thumped my chest. Half awake I stumbled to my feet on the floor. "Who are you? What does this mean?"

"It means they got up the stairs very quietly," said Styles. "We ought to have barricaded the door."

"Outside now, and quickly," said the cloaked man.

We went down the steep and narrow stairs in single file, a man with a lantern in front, the leader at the rear. In the darkened taproom stood the frightened innkeeper in shirt and breeches. As we passed outside I muttered to Styles: "Pym was too clever for us."

"These are not Pym's men," he replied.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE ADVENTURE AT BEAUFORT HOUSE

MORE men were outside the inn; altogether the party numbered about a dozen. The glitter of steel showed here and there as they massed themselves round us, making way as they did so for the passage of their leader to the middle of the group.

"We have a short walk before us. I will release your hands if you give me assurance of sensible behaviour."

"Certainly we give that assurance," said Peter.

"Take off the cords."

While our wrists were being unfastened by one of the men, Styles said: "I waste no protests, Sir Captain. You did us the honour of some enquiry at 'The Three Tobacco Pipes.' But I ask by what authority you commit this violence?"

The leader tapped the butt of his sword.

"You should know that I am in the service of the King, Colonel Peter Styles by name, and that I am in London by order of His Majesty. Of course, if you are from the Parliament——"

"From the Parliament—Pest! As to the King, Colonel Styles, he has apparently changed his mind about you."

We were forming up, four men in front, the remainder behind, when Styles said: "Our horses, do we take them?"

"I fear not. They must pay your reckoning."

The half-dressed innkeeper came forward at a call from Styles.

" Worthy friend, do you take good care of our mounts and you shall be liberally repaid. Send a message to the house of Colonel Eure in Covent Garden, whence provision for them will be forthcoming, also recompense for yourself. Tell——"

" Enough," interrupted the leader, and he pushed us into position.

An irregular little procession, we turned down the road to the west, Peter and I, side by side.

" Who are they? " I asked.

" I have no glimmer. What dog's luck that they should have found us. Those two travellers must have gone on to some tavern in Westminster where they told of your exploit."

" Are they King's men? "

" So they say, but I'd wager five golden guineas we are not King's prisoners. The mystery cannot be for long."

We had been walking for ten minutes when we came to a wide gateway opening into gardens at the back of which we could faintly perceive a mansion.

The party knew the place well, for without hesitation and without instructions they filed along at the side of the house to an entrance with steps before it, and here there was a halt for a minute. Then the leader, with four of the men and our two selves, mounted the steps, the remainder of our escort disappearing to the rear of the building. Menservants with lights were waiting in the square hall to which we were shown, and it became more and more apparent that we were expected and that preparations had been made for us. We were taken along a passage to an inner room and here our captor removed his cloak and hat and we saw him to be a middle-aged man with a scar across his face; even to my inexperienced eye, he bore the marks of a soldier.

" Colonel Styles and Geoffrey Neame," he said, " you have been taken on behalf of the King by Colonel Goring. This is Beaufort House, belonging to Lord Worcester. I am in his service delegated for the assistance of Colonel Goring. So much you may know. I am Captain Higginbottom."

" His Majesty has no stauncher friend than Worcester," said Styles. " Bear with me, Captain, if I ask whether he is privy to our detention. Time was when he and I were on speaking terms. 'Twas at Mainz there ten years since."

" Old friends are sometimes new enemies. But I'll hazard, Colonel Styles, my lord does not now know of your existence. He is at Badminton in the country. This house and its servants, of whom I am one, are under the command of Colonel Goring on behalf of the King."

" May we communicate with our friends? "

" That does not come within my discretion."

" I'll repeat to you, Captain, that I am an officer of the King in London under His Majesty's endorsement."

" All that can be explained, at the same time that you, as a so-called servant of the King, explain your visit—a lengthy visit, to the house of Master Pym only a few hours ago."

" I wonder how much you know," said Styles.

" Just sufficient for my duty, nothing more. I leave you now. Two men will be on guard outside the door and to save trouble I may say that others are within call. This lattice window, as you will observe when the sun is up, gives on to a small courtyard, quite enclosed. This again to save you trouble."

" How long are we to be kept here? " I burst out.

" If I knew I would not tell you. Some breakfast will

be sent to you in an hour's time, and during the day a couple of mattresses will be placed in the room. Give no trouble and I'll treat you lightly."

I would have spoken again, but Styles signed to me for silence.

"Of what use, Geoffrey? The Captain does nought but what he is compelled. I make him our obligations for his personal attention."

"We old soldiers know the twists of war," said Higginbottom.

"Be sure of kindly treatment, Captain, when I have you under lock and key," replied Styles with a bow.

When we were alone Styles stretched his hands above his head and yawned. "I have known worse prisons," he said.

"What does it all mean? Who are these men? What is this house they have brought us to? They talk of the King——"

"One thing at a time. Why we are here I do not yet know. What I do know is that Goring with admirable forethought has secured this, the London residence of Lord Worcester, for his own use under cover of the royal emergency. Worcester is one who thinks the King can do no wrong; he has already poured out treasure for him without limit. To lend his London house to the loyal-hearted Goring would be a privilege. I told you Goring was an incalculable man. What is in his mind? While we wait for breakfast tell me again carefully and point by point this story of yours from the beginning."

We sat down on a long stool under the window and I went over all the occurrences from that day in Canterbury when father lost his life, telling everything I could remember about Herrill, Cynthia, Wilford, Lyall and myself. Now and again Styles shot in a question, but for the

most part he was silent. At the end he got up and walked about the room in thought. Presently he said: "Neame, let me give you my opinion of Goring and don't glare at me when I do it. In the first place he is not a coward, and he is as clever as he is bold. Everybody knows it; Pym is wise to try to secure him. In the Low Countries Goring showed his mettle start and finish. You heard him speak to Pym of what Skippon did at the siege of Breda. He did not tell his own record in that hot and desperate work. The Spaniards—an army against a regiment—sent in a flood of bullets, and Goring went ahead to the most advanced sap. If you ever meet any of the old soldiers they will still talk of his encouragements and recklessness that day. A friend of his, this Lyall, was one of those who fell wounded in the open. Goring went over the mound in the face of a fusillade, lifted him up and carried him to the shelter of the sap. He fought on when many men of courage would have gone back. He had already promised his soldiers double pay from his own pocket if they remained at their posts with him. He had twenty-two men shot dead round him. When a bullet through the ankle brought him down he was carried off the field against his will. That's one picture of Goring. You can't frighten him. Goring from youth up has been a pursuer of women. That's the other side. He is no mere butterfly. When he fixes on a woman he thinks of nothing else, is blinded by passions which seem to be much deeper than those in ordinary men. The strength of the tempest in him is part of the danger for any woman on whom his eye alights. He is devastatingly in love. I am wondering if his ambition to command the Parliament's army is not to give way before his desire for Mistress Wilford, has not already done so. Else why are we here? "

" What of his talk with Pym? "

" He is ambitious in the biggest way He may have thought to take Mistress Wilford in his stride. Our seizure possibly indicates a break with Pym. Whether or no he seems determined to possess her."

" But his wife! He cannot do this openly."

" Married these fourteen years Goring has never permitted domestic responsibilities to interfere with his impulses. He may be thinking of annulment, divorce, Heaven knows what. He is capable of anything. More likely he just intends to run off with her—especially if he has broken with Pym. He has a good chance here in London to snatch the girl. With Granville out of the way, what are his obstacles? They jump to the eye—a certain Colonel entrusted with her protection and a young giant from Kent who would sleep on her doorstep to make sure of her safety."

" He has shut us up so that he may be unhampered? "

" There is every sign of it."

All that day we threshed over the situation, bending our minds to the possibility of escape. Disregarding Higginbottom's warning we turned our eye to the lattice window, but put the prospect of using it on one side as soon as we had studied the courtyard below. Once we had a wild thought of breaking into the corridor and overcoming the guards. We discussed the offer of a bribe to Higginbottom. In between times we buoyed ourselves with the hope that the landlord of " The Blue Posts " had sent the message to Covent Garden.

It was seven o'clock in the evening when we were revolving the project of trussing up Higginbottom and holding him as a hostage that the subject of our converse came into us. His manner was hurried; he wore his hat and sword.

"Prepare for a journey," he said; "in fifteen minutes we are on the road."

"I hope you are not speeding into further trouble," said Styles aloofly.

"Life is full of risks, Colonel," said Higginbottom.

"Where are we bound for?"

"We go to Oxford. We believe you will be in surer custody. Your friends of the Parliament will be the less likely to break prison for you."

"Spare me your insults," said Styles. "I am the King's servant. I beg you not to forget it."

"Then you will have little to complain of, for Oxford is His Majesty's most devoted city. But I am not here to argue. I take with me eight men. You will not be bound——"

"'Twould be observable on the high road," said Styles.

"But I give you fair explicit warning, you must think not of flight. My men will be armed. They are old soldiers, and they have their orders."

When Higginbottom had gone, Styles rubbed his hands gleefully. "Goring has been checked. These are new directions."

"We are going far from Cynthia."

"A long road has many diversions. We might meet friends. A thunderstorm might help us. Part of our journey will be in the dark. We shall pass by fields and woods."

When we were taken out to the yard where the mounted men were in waiting, Styles' face fell a little as he saw the horses which had been provided. True, my mount was large, raw-boned, fit to take my weight, but his ribs showed only too plainly, and there were signs of age about him. Peter had been given a small jennet, light

and ill-conditioned. They were sorry steed compared to the horses of the guard.

"We are not to get far if we run away," whispered Peter. "All the same, I smell good fortune. This is a forced excursion."

During those days I had many examples of Peter Styles' good judgment, wondered sometimes if he had a sixth sense in his calculations, so often were they accurate, though in fact his prevision was but a natural astuteness, sharpened by a life of danger. Never did his outlook and his prophecies receive quicker justification than on this evening after we had set forth from Beaufort House. He must indeed have been surprised himself when, only a quarter of a mile along the way, three horsemen edged out from the side of the road to confront our party. The leader, a tall, handsome man with silky black hair, lifted his hand as though by way of command. Higginbottom called a halt.

"I am on the King's business," said the stranger. "My name is Colonel Eure and I have arrived but twelve hours ago from His Majesty's camp at York. I understand that under some misconception Colonel Peter Styles and a friend of his have been held prisoners by the seneschal of Lord Worcester."

"I am Captain Higginbottom, in charge of Beaufort House during my Lord's absence. I hold the two men you speak of."

"I desire to assure you that Colonel Goring has wrongfully detained them, using the King's name towards some private quarrel. I pledge their inoffensiveness. I have the honour of acquaintanceship with Lord Worcester. I trust my word will be sufficient."

"You should have gone to Colonel Goring."

"Colonel Goring is elusive. While I vainly sought for

him this afternoon I sent a messenger to Beaufort House, alas, without result."

"I have seen Colonel Goring. Your word is unacceptable to him. He goes so far as to doubt your identity, says Colonel Eure is still with the King. I must ask you to ride to one side."

"One moment, pray. This matter can easily be set at rest. My friend here is Master Tom Verney, son of Sir Edmund Verney, the King's standard bearer. If his word is of no avail, return with me to my house at Covent Garden. Friends can be sent for——"

"This is useless talk, be you Colonel Eure or not. My commands are imperative. I take these two men to Oxford, where you can seek them if you will."

"I warn you this is flagrant disaffection towards His Majesty. It is my duty to prevent it at any cost."

His tone was as soft as before, but his hand had gone over to his sword hilt.

"I and Master Verney and my manservant place ourselves across the road."

"You would try to bar our passage?" cried Higginbottom, drawing his sword in turn.

"And we begin thus," said Tom Verney. He levelled a pistol at Higginbottom's horse and shot it through the head. Horse and rider went down in a heap.

In the noisy riot that followed I saw Tom Verney club an on-coming rider with the butt of his pistol, saw Colonel Eure and his servant with gleaming blades push towards him in readiness for a general onslaught. Two or three of the Worcester men were on the ground trying to release the stunned Higginbottom who was pinioned down by his dead horse.

"Back out, back out," said Styles in my ear.

We were around and away without interference; no one gave a thought to us in the excitement.

" The Blue Posts," said Styles; " our horses."

" Are we not deserting our friends? "

" We should but encumber them. Higginbottom will not attack Eure once we are gone. Besides Verney has another pistol."

The landlord of " The Blue Posts " was at the door as we came dashing up, and marvellous to sight, our horses ready saddled were being led out to us by the ostler before we were at a standstill.

" Colonel Eure and his friend came here two hours ago," said the landlord. " He arranged it. Told me you would be here at any time and certainly in great haste. He settled all the reckoning."

Styles found baldric and sword hanging from his pommel.

" That man Eure," he said, " he almost persuades me to become a Papist."

The horses were fresh and it was a delight to feel the way they moved under us. Covent Garden was where we aimed for; we had to hear about Cynthia whatever befell. I had the secret hope that we might take her with us.

We were soon within sight of Westminster, and skirting St. James' Park to the left we entered Covent Garden on the northern side. In our hurried look around as we cantered into the square we saw two or three men standing in talk with each other on the corner near the Strand and a couple of horses in charge of a boy awaiting riders on the eastern side.

At the Eures' house Peter jumped from his saddle and threw me his bridle rein.

" Wait here. We are probably watched."

The door was opened by an old steward, by name Mainwaring, whom I had seen on my first visit, and plainly he was expecting us. Peter listened intently to what he had to say, darted in a query or two and then ran down the steps to me. He told news in a few quick sentences. "The ostler from 'The Blue Posts' was here this morning an hour after Eure had unexpectedly arrived from York on a brief visit. Eure took his wife and Cynthia to the house of his friend, Sir Edward Hopton, in Kensington; Lady Hopton is there with a good band of servants. Later he sought out his kinsman, Tom Verney. The ostler and the landlord of 'The Blue Posts' knew Higginbottom, and Eure made a guess or two about the handiwork of Goring. Word was to be given you that danger waits at Splicing Oaks."

"Danger at Splicing Oaks! What danger?"

"Mainwaring knew no more. The message was given hurriedly by Eure."

"Is Cynthia safe for the time, Colonel Styles?"

"Safer than she would be with you and me after all that has occurred."

"I am away for Kent forthwith. What of you? Will you not come with me?"

Peter hesitated for a second.

"My skin's not safe in London now. I would see this story to its end. I might be of some help."

"I should indeed be grateful for your company."

"And your mother has a most excellent brew of ale."

He swung himself into the saddle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE DESCENT ON SPLICING OAKS

WITH two friends Goring sat at supper in his lodging at St. Martin's Lane, composed and serious, reshaping for immediate action a design long pondered. Fate had suddenly served him.

One of his companions was a square-shouldered man whose doublet was partly unfastened and who had wine stains on his wrist lace. His tawny hair had been carelessly combed and his eyes were bright with drinking. He carried an air of vigour; if dissipation had put pouches under his eyes it had sapped little of his strength or hardihood. He had been of promise, Harry Dalton. The other was a man dressed in brown velvet, hawk-faced with cavernous eyes. His hands were white and slender. He drank sparingly and was less inclined for talk than Dalton.

On a chair in a corner of the room lay swords and hats and by them on the floor a saddle. A dozen candles on the table, and others in sconces by the windows lighted up the apartment, furnished with deep-coloured hangings and paintings. Elegant glassware and curiously wrought silver amid the half-emptied dishes told of Goring's taste. A log fire blazed brightly despite the summer evening.

"You've kept this comfortable nook a secret," said Dalton, as the meal neared its end. "Your father's house——"

"I have much business of my own. Some privacy is required."

"A pretty nest for a pretty bird," laughed Dalton. "Tell us about the fledgling; 'tis time."

Goring turned to the other man as if he had not heard the question.

"How long was Eure ahead of you from York, Lyall?"

"But an hour or two. At times I almost trod upon his heels."

"Wilford is better, you say?"

"Recovering fast. I was glad to get your summons. He was aspersing me unduly and he has many friends."

"Time you were away. I hold Pym firmly. I look to be Lieutenant-General under Essex. A period of weeks and that faint heart——"

Goring turned his gaze towards Dalton and said sternly, "I rely on stopped ears and a shut mouth."

Dalton laughed coarsely.

"Otherwise it's a question whether you slit my throat before I can slit yours, eh, Goring? Proceed, I'm here to help you seize a wench, at least as serious a business as any treasonable babblings."

"Goring, are you set on this girl?" said Lyall. "You risk much for a fancy. No woman is worth it."

"I'll break with Pym rather than she shall go. Is that enough?"

"Time we knew about her," said Dalton. "Your treason can wait till to-morrow."

"You are right," said Goring slowly. "Meanwhile, Dalton, you will do well to pick your words with more delicacy. Learn then that the girl I take under protection to-night is Mistress Cynthia Wilford."

The soldier of fortune leaned back in his chair and whistled to himself. "I thought it was the cherry-ripe wife of a vintner, an orange girl, the daughter of a pros-

perous trader. Wilford's daughter! My faith, the man who puts hand to this affair——"

"You flinch?"

"What's to gain for me?"

"A quittance for the two thousand guineas you owe me for your losses. One hundred golden guineas in your hand to-morrow morning."

Dalton's eyes opened wide. "You have a way with you, Goring."

"Serve yourself a glass of wine and grumble no more."

He turned to Lyall. "I have three hired men I can depend on waiting at the stables in Long Acre just below here. We go to the house in Covent Garden——"

A knock at the door interrupted Goring and a servant entered.

"Captain Higginbottom is outside and demands to see you."

"Higginbottom! The man should be on the way to Oxford. I'll come to him. Stay. Bring him hither."

Higginbottom came in, and he burst forth with his news before Goring could speak. He was excited and angry.

"Neame and Styles have got clear. I lost a horse which cost thirty guineas."

"Explain yourself," said Goring, very cold and hard.

"Colonel Eure with Master Verney and a servant stopped us on the road. Master Verney shot my horse and I fell pinned and senseless. In the confusion they galloped off; my men let them go——"

"Let them go! You call yourself a soldier—you scullion——"

"Don't shout at me, Colonel Goring. I can shout as loud as you."

Goring sprang to his feet with a blasphemous word, but he checked himself.

"Go on."

"I'm not saying my men weren't right. I've learned about Colonel Eure and Master Verney. My Lord Worcester will like not this business. Only a month ago I paid thirty guineas for that horse. I am going to my Lord——"

"What are you here for?"

"I want the price of my horse—thirty guineas."

"You are a worthless cowardly servant. I will indeed settle with you. Lord Worcester will thank me. You will never collect that thirty guineas, Higginbottom."

As he finished, Goring drew a pistol from his sash, but before he could present it Higginbottom made two rapid steps backward into the open doorway and was immediately out of sight in the passage. They heard him retreating to the outer door, heard some curses and some threats.

"I relish him," said Dalton. "A sturdy fellow!"

Goring replaced the pistol in his sash.

"We must be going."

Half an hour later at the Eure house in Covent Garden, old Mainwaring was roused by a thundering at the door and hastened to unfasten it thinking that his master had returned. As he fumbled with the bolts he heard strange voices and if he had a tremor it disappeared in the thought that Colonel Eure was likely to bring home friends with him. He took down the heavy wooden bar and lifted the latch. What happened left him breathless, helpless. The door came in with a rush under the pressure of several men and the steward was borne backwards, tottering. The foremost intruder seized him by

the neckcloth, dragged him to the stairs, forced him to a seat and put the point of a sword to his throat. The hall was filled with armed men by this time. Two maidservants were screaming with fright somewhere in the background.

" Where is Mistress Wilford? " demanded Goring.

Mainwaring stammered that she was not in the house, and then when he felt the prick of Goring's sword he feebly exclaimed that she had been taken away.

" You mean by Colonel Styles and Geoffrey Neame? "

Either in fright or cunning, perhaps with a mixture of both, the old man nodded his head in assent. Goring stepped back from him.

" Search the house. Three on this floor, three on the next, and be sure you look in the garrets. Speed, speed! We must be after them if they are gone."

Peter Styles and I all unconscious of pursuit yet had incentive for making good time and after we had crossed the river at Battersea we set ourselves for Rochester. Our horses were strong, and though we were delayed by the rutted lanes as far as the main Dover road we pushed on at a good pace afterwards and we had a sight of Rochester Castle, dim and forbidding by the water's brink as the clocks struck twelve.

Never did man enjoy six hours' sleep more than I in the inn that night. Peter, old soldier that he was, was first astir, and while we were taking a meal to start us on our way (having first seen the horses well provided) he explained to me sententiously that heavy lids were the bane of recruits, to be guarded against by all commanders and gave me an instance of danger to Marsden's regiment—fortunately averted—on the march to the Oder in the year 1631. I replied that despite the maxims of Pappenheim and Tilly even of the great Gus-

tavus himself, I intended on reaching Splicing Oaks to have a full twelve hours of slumber to make up for lost time.

" We may not find Splicing Oaks a place of rest," said Peter, helping himself to another steak from the dish on the table in front of us. " We know not what we meet. In my experience a simple farmhouse is as likely as not to produce a pretty piece of fighting, provided always the structure is sound, the defence well rallied and there is a sufficiency of arms. What ravishing sherry gravy! I must come to Rochester again."

We had a long day on the road and the light was near gone when we reached Canterbury and " The Fleur de Lis." The lateness of the hour and the tired state of our horses half disposed us to stay the night and make the twelve miles to Eastry in the morning.

" So I would advise you," said Host Paramor, " but for the men ahead of you bound for Splicing Oaks."

" Men bound for Splicing Oaks! "

" I liked not their demeanour. Parliament soldiers, carrying carbines. They talked among themselves of sleeping the night in the farmhouse. Had they tarried longer I should have sent a messenger to Splicing Oaks with a warning. They've been gone but an hour."

" This was the danger that Eure had learned of," I said to Peter.

" Mainwaring was told to warn us against coming here. Our hearing was muddled or else his words were."

" We must hasten on."

Peter Styles scratched his ear.

" Is it prudent? Two men with one sword between them to attack ten well-armed soldiers! Moreover, they seek for us. They are the better thwarted in our absence."

"I'll not rest here. If I can reach the house I have men, guns and powder, too."

"Even so, Geoffrey, I think 'twere wiser to remain away."

"Say no more. I go alone."

Peter turned to Host Paramor. "Could you secure for us two fresh horses?"

"'Twill take some minutes. You can ride my own nag from the stable here. I'll go down and borrow the big chestnut from 'The Rose' for Geoffrey."

We went out of Canterbury at a fast trot, and we were abreast of Wingham half way to Eastry before we eased our horses and were able to take counsel as to how we should approach the farm.

"Now we've begun I'm for pressing straight on to the house," said Peter. "Our one big chance is to get there before them."

"Not much hope of that."

"They may go to the village for a guide. They may be winding wrongly through some of these lanes."

He fell to asking how many men lived in or around the house, the number of muskets I possessed and details about match and ball. Suddenly he ceased and brought his horse to a standstill.

"Do you hear aught?"

The faintest zephyr murmured in neighbouring trees, an owl called loudly over the fields, some night insect buzzed musically across the road in front of us.

"I hear nothing."

"Listen again. They may be crossing soft ground."

I stilled my horse from a noisy champing of his bit and sat motionless for nearly a minute straining my ears. Then as Peter lifted his hand towards the road behind

us there came out from the night far away a faint "Tat-tat; tat-tat-tat; tat-tat-tat."

"Riders," said Peter, "several of them."

"We may be between a divided party."

"It cannot be. Our coming to Canterbury was unknown. We left again within twenty minutes. Moreover, they would not separate—too few of them."

He gathered up his reins.

"One thing, only, Geoffrey, to get to Splicing Oaks as quickly as we can. Enemies ahead, enemies or friends behind—I'd like a look at both before they look at us."

We made good headway, but the horses following were as fresh as our own and as we climbed the slope beyond Staple we could distinguish the blur of them where the road lay open between the fields.

On the level again with hedges on each side and some twistings of direction we lost sight of our pursuers but not the sound of them. Peter was of opinion that we gained a little. As we began the gentle rise, the timbered summit of which would give us full view of Splicing Oaks two hundred yards further on, the riders were still out of view and I reckoned there was half a mile between us if not more.

Our horses were down to a walk now and as the chimneys of Splicing Oaks rose before us over the hill, Peter turned in from the gravelled road to the grass by the side. "As well to go quietly. If all is clear at the house we ride there fast. A minute extra for preparation may make all the difference."

The grass led us up and along to the shadow of the elms where we might be unseen while we spied ahead. The hope which had risen high in us was scattered at the first glance along the road to the house. In front of the gate to the lane were a band of horsemen, some on foot,

some still in the saddle. Lanterns flickered here and there. A colloquy was going on across the gate; I thought I could distinguish Will Dyson's voice.

What were the feelings of Peter Styles in that moment of discovery as he sat woodenly erect, fixed of gaze, I know not. As for me disappointment quickly gave way to anger at this outrage on my home by the Parliament. I went hot that I was not there to receive the party. I wondered if we could get round unobserved to the orchard gate, and had hardly conceived the idea when the sound of hoof beats came from behind. We had forgotten the pursuing riders. Not more than a gunshot away now they were making towards us at a trot.

"They may be friends," said Peter; "we need them badly."

On they came till one could count them, six all told.

"Cavaliers," muttered Peter. "Who the devil——"

Then the leader caught sight of us under the trees, and he cried loudly, "Here they are."

I knew the voice, indeed was near enough to recognise the figure of the man.

"Goring," I said to Peter.

We were on the move before they had whipped their horses to the gallop. Pell-mell we rode for Splicing Oaks, reckless and desperate, hoping that those in front would clear away for what must have seemed an infuriated band descending on them.

Behind us were fierce calls, mixed with the pounding of hoofs, the clinking of buckle and chain, the rattle of scabbards. Ahead the startled Parliamentarians were moving hither and thither in a hurried attempt at some kind of order. Men on foot were scrambling to the saddle.

"Is there a road right or left?" shouted Peter.

"There's a dip in the hedge. Slacken your horse when I do."

On our right the barley field was separated from the road by a scrubby hedge of blackthorn, and at a point nearly opposite the house it had thinned away, and in the winter some marauding heifers had trampled down a gap. The troopers were but a dozen yards beyond. What I feared was that Goring and his men might be on us as we lessened our pace for the turn.

"Steady," I cried to Peter, and pulled the chestnut to a canter.

I heard the jubilance of those behind us; we were as good as captured. They came on like a gale.

"Now," I shouted, turning my horse, and kicking his flanks mercilessly.

So close were the Cavaliers, that we had to burst through the narrow gap side by side and were well scarified by the blackthorn. With our horses scampering hard through the knee-high barley we spared no thought to the uproar and din which arose behind us. Our object was to get from sight before any of the horsemen found their way through the break in the hedge.

Our manœuvre must have given the galloping riders at our heels the impression of a vanishment into the darkness with a purpose. They could not check their rush, and in that mad moment between our disappearance and the inevitable collision with the Parliament men, Goring and his followers imagined a trap. Fury possessed them and they went to their work like wild men.

The Parliament troopers for their part knew but the fact that Cavalier horsemen were charging them at full tilt. No time to think as to why two had swerved through the hedge. The onrush, the gleam of steel,

these made message enough for men who under Fortescue and Slingsby had seen war abroad. The foremost had swords unloosed when Goring swept upon them.

Far out in the barley we brought our horses to a stand, and though we were away from sight, the noise told us plainly what was going on. Pistol shots, the clash of sword on headpiece and breastplate, raucous shouts of command, the plunging of horses, the jangling of stirrup against stirrup, the rattling and the roar of it all gave us a picture which we had no need to see. I was shaking with excitement as I listened. Peter was busy taking the prickles out of his thigh.

" A neat device of yours, Geoffrey, well thought of. I would have liked better a hedge of privet or maple."

" The noise is lessening, Colonel Styles."

" Such an affair is always a matter of minutes. Short and sharp. Listen! Some of them are galloping off."

The sound of hoof beats dropped away towards Eastry village, though the disturbance at the farm was not yet over for we could still hear a scurrying and scuffling with the clink of metal.

" Some stout fellows at it to the last," said Peter.

There was a shot, then silence. A minute passed and horses began to move along the road, this time towards the north.

" Two of them. I'll wager that's the end."

" Do you think some of the men have been wounded —killed? "

" I make no doubt of it, a little cut-and-thrust affair like this—'tis sometimes more effective than the fusillading of a regiment. I'll swear the place is littered."

His tone was complacent.

"Horrible! I hope mother and Joan won't see anything of it."

"Odso! For me I only hope each side has taught the other a good lesson."

Leaving the horses behind us to roam in the field as they would, Peter and I walked through the barley towards the house, pausing every minute to look and listen, for, though there might be little to fear, my companion would forego no precautions.

We drew near under cover of the blackthorn hedge and peered through it. A dead horse lay in the middle of the road, and we could pick out the figures of three men, one by the gate to the lane, one in the open on the left, the third on the wayside grass almost directly opposite to where we stood. Away in the background near the house, lanterns were appearing. We could hear a moaning from one of the men.

"All clear," said Peter.

Along a furrow we made for the gap by which we had entered. In the road I left Peter examining the first of the prostrate men, climbed the gate and ran up towards the house to meet Will Dyson, Sefton and old Thompson half-way, carrying lanterns. Will had a carbine under his arm.

"It's the master," said Sefton all of a flutter.

"Not in the fight, Master Geoffrey!" exclaimed Will.

"I said he warn't," growled Thompson.

"Safe and untouched. What of mother and Joan?"

"Disturbed a bit," said Will, "they're just a-coming out now. We thought we'd best come first."

As he spoke I saw lights at the front door.

"Go down to the road and help my friend, Colonel Styles. He's looking to the men."

I ran on to mother and Joan, shouting a cheery word,

and within a minute was in the midst of a smother of embraces and disjointed weeping questions.

"We thought you were dead," said Joan. "Which of them were on your side?"

"Neither; they fell to loggerheads among themselves. It's a long story. I must go back and see who has been hurt."

"You'll want some supper," said my mother.

"And a friend beside myself. We'll both be hungry men."

I returned to the road, took a lantern which hung on the gate and walked along to where Peter Styles, Will Dyson and the others were clustered round an injured man.

Every yard or so gave evidence of how savage had been the brief encounter,—a dented head-piece, a sword hilt without blade, a pistol, pieces of broken harness, a broad-brimmed hat with its feather. The wounded man was one of Goring's party; afterwards we learned he was a certain Captain Dalton. Blood was flowing from his forehead where he had been struck by a pistol butt. He was coming to himself as I reached the group.

"I told Goring they'd be ready for us," he said thickly.

"Sit here under the hedge," said Peter, "we have others to see to."

He pointed to the grass on the opposite side of the road where a man was huddled motionless. We went across to find he was past our help with a sword thrust through his heart. Dead also was the man who lay in the open near the horse; his face was dreadfully disfigured by a bullet wound.

"One from each side," said Peter. Twenty yards along the road towards the village we found another

man whose shoulder was badly shattered but who still had life in him. He it was whose moaning we had heard. We made shift to bind him up and stop the bleeding, and Sefton and old Thompson got a hurdle and carried him up to the house. I saw from his clothes that he was one of the Parliament party.

An hour later the two injured men, under the ministrations of Joan, were well bandaged and made as comfortable as possible, the Parliament trooper upstairs in bed, Dalton propped up with cushions in the parlour. We brought the bodies of the other men to the cart-house and covered them with sacks, and Thompson put collar and traces on the mare and dragged the dead horse from the road on to the grass near the rick-yard.

In the kitchen after supper there was a rare lot of talk in explanation by all of us.

"Every night I've had Sefton on watch by the gate with a gun, like you told me before you went away, Master Geoffrey," said Will. "He came and fetched me when all these soldiers rode up and told him to take off the chains and padlocks so they could get in. I went out to them and they said they was after you. I told them you was away, and some of them got off their horses to try and break down the gate. Then your friends came galloping along the road."

"Friends!" I said.

The next morning Dalton, though pale from loss of blood and well bruised, was on his feet and declared himself fit for travel. Peter and I talked with him and he declared himself vastly grateful for our attentions.

"A fellow reached me at the onset while I was busy with another. I must have gone down like a log. You have some stalwarts with you."

"Our men are pretty good," said Peter, "you should have known that."

"Goring was hot-headed for the girl you have here. I warned him on the way you'd be prepared. He wouldn't hear of it."

Peter nodded comprehendingly.

"'Twas always his fault. Now, Master Dalton, the sooner you are on your way the better. Our people round about will be much inflamed, 'tis safer you should leave."

Dalton had a gloomy look.

"My horse is gone. I'm afraid my purse——"

"The boy brought in two horses this morning," I said. "He found them half way to the village cropping the grass. Likely enough one is yours."

"If they belong elsewhere," said Peter, "we'll make you a present and you can take your choice."

"Sink me, you're a pair! If ever I can be of service ——"

"Don't come near Splicing Oaks again, that's all we ask," said Peter.

Before Dalton went he told us of the supper party the night before, and of Higginbottom's visit to Goring's lodging. Peter Styles was full of appreciation.

"And all the while Goring did not know of what awaited him here at the farm."

"How was he to know? 'Tis full of mystery for me even now."

Peter was portentous.

"As a soldier you'll understand we can say no word to you of that."

Dalton was weak and shaken and we sent Will Dyson with him to Canterbury partly from charity, partly because we wanted our horses fetched from "The Fleur de Lis," and also to ascertain the whereabouts of Goring.

Will returned with the information that Goring and his friend Lyall and one of his men were resting at " The Fountain."

Talk with the Parliament trooper was put off until the surgeon whom we had fetched from Deal told us the man was in more pain than danger, though liable to give us the trouble of nursing for some time. Joan let us into the room with caution for kindliness to one who was still suffering. The fellow looked sore-stricken as we saw him in bed, wan of face with pinched mouth.

" Getting better? " said Peter.

" What are you going to do with me? "

" Make you well," I said. " Give you plenty of food and beer."

" We never expected those devils of yours to come down on us."

" Forget all about it," said Peter cheerily. " We had to protect ourselves."

" Oh, ah," he said dully, and turned his cheek on to the pillow with a sigh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE MEETING IN THE WOOD

PETER enjoyed at least as long a sleep as I did, a fact on which I made a comment while he was engaged with cold rabbit pie at our morning meal—mother hovering near with a jug of ale, and Joan in front of the fire busy with lamb chops which were frizzling away in the frying pan.

"You missed the full signification of my remarks, Geoffrey," said Peter with his mouth full. "The capacity for little rest, and ears aprick in slumber—they are part of the equipment of a soldier in the field. They have their counterpart in ability to sleep deep and long when safety is assured. Thus does the experienced campaigner lay up within himself reserves for the time when sleep is the enemy."

"No visitor but what likes our beds," said mother.

"The King himself would be fortunate with such a couch as mine last night," replied Peter. "I do stand to it with a challenge, Mistress Neame, that all England could not produce better beds or better food than Splicing Oaks."

"You think we shall be safe now?" said Joan, turning round from the fire, fork in hand.

"Goring—I'll warrant he's had a stomach full, and Parliament, well, they'll send a regiment if they send at all."

"A regiment!" exclaimed Joan.

Peter smiled between his mouthfuls.

"Geoffrey strikes fire in unexpected places, but he is not yet important enough for that."

"I am very glad," said Joan.

"Moreover I looked round outside while this most toothsome meal was in preparation, and I can tell you that for anything less than a regiment you have here the makings of a fortress. The quick-set hedges on three sides are a god-send. The gate from the road and the one at the back of the orchard could be made defensible, might indeed be turned into snares. The open country around—with some small arrangement for a watchful man on the roof, and another on the top of one of the ricks, with stout farm lads within and plenty of powder and ball—the Tower of London might be less secure."

We walked round the homestead after breakfast, and I showed Peter our barns, the stables, the hayricks with the best thatch in East Kent on them, and gave him the points of the yearling bull. He had a boy's delight in the frolicsomeness of the calves when Joan went into the paddock to feed them. He shook his head at our massive horses, though he admitted their value for commissariat purposes and the drawing of cannon into position. He had some questions about the ancestry of the colt which rubbed its nose against his sleeve in lively amiability.

Leaning over the orchard gate we could see Ned Tulks and Sefton cutting a field of peas on our right. Away on the distant fallow the air was undulating with the heat. I had a comforting sense of home.

"A soldier's life is the best to be had by any man," said Peter; "yet for second place one might choose a

worse lot than yours. You have even your own brewhouse, I perceive. Some day perhaps when I am older, and the turn of fortune comes—but I could never learn to milk cows."

Peter's eyes had fallen on our fifteen cows in the meadow towards Heronden.

"I tried it once at Bouvignes on the Meuse. Dick Ryan and I were cut off from our regiment with three days of hide-and-seek and a devastating hunger. Having no mind to die of starvation, we cornered a cow in a pasture. The animal had a grudge against me. I have had less excitement from an onfall. A fearsome creature. Can you milk cows?"

"A simple matter."

"You are a man of parts," said Peter.

We went through the orchard gate and across the fallow to the piece of woodland which gave us all kind of timber and a plenitude of faggots besides early primroses for Joan, and pretty green glades in hot summer weather. The copse rambled for a score of acres, mostly in the bottom of a valley, and was split in two by a lane levelled as a cart track. At the further end one might see the extent of Splicing Oaks land, which reaches beyond Hamwold. Joan used to say I made this an excuse to take people through the lane, being ashamed to tell them how beautiful it was. Bracken high as Peter's head was backed by saplings and bushes draped with eglantine. Buttercups made splashes of yellow along the footway. An incessant cawing came from the rookery out of sight among the tree tops to our left. A thrush high up in an ash ahead of us trilled out his song.

"My faith, 'tis lovely here," said Peter. "You know the songs of the birds?"

"Most of them."

" Able to milk cows, and——"

From behind a great holly bush immediately in our passage stepped Goring, Lyall and a trooper. In the shock of it, all thoughts went from me; I was rooted—turned to stone. Not so Peter. In a flash his blade was drawn, but Lyall and the trooper were on him like cats, and as I stood there motionless, with Goring's sword-point not a foot from my breast the fight was over so far as Peter was concerned. The trooper pressed him hard and fast, and Lyall, heedless of the peril in his action ran in close and struck him on the head with his hilt. Peter sagged, and collapsed.

" That was well done," said Goring. " Kick his sword away. You didn't overdo it, Lyall? "

" He'll see daylight in a minute or two. 'Twas but a tap."

Goring's eyes had not left mine; sideways he had taken in the fight with Styles.

" Now sirrah, my time is short. I have reasons to make quick work of you. I give you a chance. You have at your farmhouse Mistress Wilford, and I need her presence here within a space of minutes. Can you bring her with a word or two? It will be well for you if you are able."

I saw Lyall advancing towards me, taking inkhorn, quill and some paper from his pocket as he did so.

" I have a messenger to carry your letter to the house," said Goring. " Make your writing certain of response. If she fails to come, if she even tarries on the road, you're a dead man. You hear me. I keep Styles for the letter in case I'm forced to kill you quickly. Give him the paper, Lyall."

He had a ferocious assurance and energy about him. I made no response for my mind was fluttering, and I

judged he would try to kill me whether I obeyed him or not.

"Speak, you clod."

"What would you do with her?"

He pushed that shining point forward to my throat till it touched the skin.

"I give you ten seconds."

"She is not at Splicing Oaks," I blurted out.

"Take the quill."

I felt the prick of his sword, saw him quivering.

I raised my hand to do his bidding, and as I did so, wondered if the heat of my brain was bringing to me that faint new sound from somewhere in the background. I had read that men's senses play tricks with them when they are on the verge of eternity.

I took the paper and the quill from Lyall, and he held out the inkhorn for my use, and then I heard more plainly the crackling of twigs underfoot, the swishing of the parted undergrowth. Did they not hear it also? I looked in their faces to see if I was dreaming.

"Write," commanded Goring harshly.

There was a scurry down the bank behind the holly-bush as of persons sliding through the ferns and tall grass, and Goring pivoted to find himself face to face with two men who might suddenly have come down from the clouds. His amazement was not so deep as mine.

Herrill I thought buried in the depths of France, and Granville overseas scouring for him. What miracle had brought them to Splicing Oaks, intruded them at this particular hour?

"So!" said Herrill.

Goring was wondrous calm.

"Inopportune!" he said. "You have business with me?"

"Too long postponed, George Goring."

Goring shrugged his shoulders, as if resigned—though in his heart he must have known he could not take Herrill so lightly. He threw a word to Lyall, "Watch the others with your pistol."

Herrill gave his hat to Granville, but Goring disdained even that preparation; his wrist came up quickly as his opponent approached a step or two.

I felt myself go stiff at the speed and fury of their attack, draw a long breath as each emerged into a deadly watchful quiescence. Once more their blades were interlocked and how both remained unhurt from a long blaze of action was a great marvel to me.

The height and size of Goring took away nothing of quickness; I did not need to be told that he was a master of his weapon though afterwards I heard how he had practised in a different school from his opponent. Herrill without unusual stature had power packed in those tapering muscles of his, and something more than power. His feet flashed in and out like those of a dancer.

I saw thrusts parried with a touch, glittering circles of light made by the points of the weapons, a whirling attack by Goring before which Herrill gave way, a lunge by Herrill like an adder striking and then some drops of blood on Goring's wrist.

Herrill's pallor was touched with pink but his eyes were fixed, expressionless; Goring's face was flaming, and I fancied a growing anger.

In a lull of the swords I heard the thrush in the ash carolling uninterruptedly. I became conscious that Peter Styles was moving inch by inch towards Lyall and the trooper; on the ground near them lay his sword.

The end arrived with suddenness, and in my bewilderment I could not see how it was brought about. A sharp give and take, a harder and faster effort by Goring, a step of retreat by Herrill, a swerve as the thrust came, a rapid bend of his body forward, a snapping clink of steel, and Goring's sword capsized itself in the air. No chivalry in Herrill. His blade came back swiftly for the fatal stroke but it was not to be. One present was swifter.

The pistol shot was fired while I was still gasping at the magic disarming of Goring. Herrill looked blankly at the smoking weapon in Lyall's hand, his outstretched sword went slowly down and dropped on the grass. He tottered a few inches and sank down in a heap.

Goring had sprung back to his companions, uttered some word to them and, by the time Styles had scrambled up and secured his sword, the three of them were hastening down the lane away from us.

I hardly saw them. I ran forward with Granville to Herrill's side, and knelt down and took his hand which was limp and losing its warmth. From his breast through torn cloth blood was spreading. He tried to smile at me. "Good boy," he whispered—so low that I could barely hear him.

Peter Styles touched me on the shoulder bidding me make room for him, and then he and Granville went to work with the knowledge of soldiers who had been in battle, and I stood back with a childish reliance on them. They cut off Herrill's upper clothes, exposing what to me was a sickening wound in his breast, and then they turned him over and I saw that the bullet had gone right through him.

"Better that way," grunted Peter. He tore his sash into strips while Granville pulled apart some linen lining

from his doublet and frayed it into fluff with his sword. A pad of the soft linen was placed over the wound back and front and bound tightly in place by pieces of Peter's sash.

While Granville and Styles were finishing their work, Sefton, gripping his faghook, slid down the bank from among the undergrowth.

"I heard a shot, Master Geoffrey. Ned Tulks is behind. I was afear'd——" His eye fell on the prostrate man. "Who is it, Master Geoffrey?"

"Master Herrill. Speed back, and send two men here with the stretcher from the woodhouse. Tell my sister to get the best bed ready."

Granville looked up. "Bring some pillows and straw with the stretcher, better still pillows and a mattress."

"If Will Dyson is home from Eastry, tell him to take Polly and ride to Deal for the surgeon. If Will has not returned, go yourself."

"Aye, master."

Ned Tulks came and was followed by old Thompson, and we all stood round on the grass looking down at the unconscious Herrill while he waited for the stretcher.

"Will he die?" I asked Granville.

"I cannot tell. At first I thought it was a shot through the heart—the villain aimed for it—and that would have settled things. But the bullet missed his heart. The danger is the loss of blood may take him off through weakness. If we can stop the flow, and he can hold out there is a chance for him."

"Thank God for that."

"Yes, thank God for that," he said.

"How did you come on us?" I asked.

"We reached Dover from France early this morning.

Herrill would not hear of an hour's delay. We rode for Splicing Oaks half expecting that Mistress Wilford would be here. We made salutation to your mother and sister, heard a word of last night's comedy, and straightway came to find you. The men in the peafield gave us your direction. We had a glimpse of trouble through the gate-way, and found our way to you among the trees."

"Herrill may die. I should surely have died otherwise."

"It might have been any one of us. I shall begin to believe in Providence if he gets better. I knew he was with Hepburn's regiment. I had the luck to find him at Amiens, this side of Paris. We had good horses on land, a fair wind in the channel. Altogether a conjuncture which it would have been audacious to pray for. Sometimes it thus happens."

"I would that the good fortune had continued," I said.

On our walk to the house, Herrill's rent and blood-stained doublet slipped from my arm, and as I stopped to pick it up I saw projecting from an inner pocket a sealed packet. Granville saw it too.

"Put his papers in safe keeping, Master Neame," he said sombrely.

I took out the letter and read the superscription.

"Master Geoffrey Neame,
At Splicing Oaks Farm,
Eastry,
Nr. Canterbury,
England.
To be delivered in all haste."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE STORY OF JASPER HERRILL

HERRILL lived; and I shall always think his recovery was due as much to the brisk attention of Granville and Styles after the fight as to Joan's ceaseless care in the sickroom. For a day and a night it was hit or miss with him, and after that we were not free from anxious hours. A lung had been touched, the surgeon said. Granville and Styles stayed on, neither thinking of departure till the injured man showed a turn, which was after a full week.

They found a score of interests for talk between them in the intervals of lending me a hand in breaking the year old colt, or as they sat smoking pipes in the kitchen after supper. Much that they said was remote from my experience, or indeed from hearsay knowledge, and their discourse had a fascination, due in part to the newness of their topics, more largely to the authority with which each spoke of what were mysteries to a countryman like me, and to the vivacious stories with which arguments were fortified. I became familiar with the talk of leaguer and onfall, of palisades and ambuscadoes, of wall-pieces and mortar pieces, of drakes and sakers, and demi-culverins. Nearly the whole of one evening was taken by Styles's description of the new methods which had been formulated by the great Gustavus Adolphus. My head buzzed with the intricacies of it all—the shortening of pikes, the lessened weight of fronts and headpieces, the opening of the ranks for continuous firing.

I heard of cavalry trained not to fire their pistols till they could see the whites of their opponents' eyes, of how ineffective is a sword attack against mailed men. The digging of earthworks provided a disquisition in itself.

Not all the conversation was of major plans and actions; they had a difference of opinion as to the dress of an officer, Granville contending that the sash was a valuable badge of command in battle, Styles insistent that it was an encumbrance to be discarded before the fighting began. Each one had incidents to support his point of view. In the course of their disputation they looked up and caught me smiling.

"I ask your pardon," I said, "but you have great seriousness for trifles."

"Trifles!" ejaculated Styles.

"I am not a soldier."

Granville scratched his chin.

"I suspect you, Master Neame. I have noticed the trait before. You are, I fear, a philosopher."

My mother who was busy with some needle-work at the end of the table looked up indignantly. "I am sure Geoffrey is nothing like that," she said.

If Styles had most to tell of the modern art of war it was Granville who gave light on the doings at court, on the characters of those who were but great names to us, and I for one was surprised at the weaknesses and simplicities of those whom we were accustomed to regard as persons beyond the reach of common feelings. We learned that the King hated fried veal, and was always likely to be irritated by a dress of red on a lady at court. His Majesty, said Granville, was no more averse from Biblical quotations than the veriest Puritan; he indulged his children over-much, did not like his counsellors to make jokes in his presence, and had almost a passion for

raspberry vinegar. He would combat plans put forward by the Queen, but always ended by doing exactly what she wanted. As for the Queen she was full of schemes and obstinacy, and even those closest to her could not tell the way her mind was tending. She was kind to those around her, callous about people she had not seen, and convinced of the King's God-given Majesty to rule the English people. She used to be dainty but was getting fat owing to her fondness for beer.

We had a picture of the brusqueness of Culpepper and Wilford, the former being the better statesman, the latter the better soldier, though each was at home in camp and council. Hyde was obstinate, jealous of his personal precedence, yet with a curious affection for the King, Hopton was a soldier who seldom touched wine, and had never been known to use a coarse word. "A strange, self-denying man, but there are many to make up for his deficiencies."

"What think you of the outcome of it all?" I asked.

"There can be but one outcome when rebels are in arms against their lawful King."

"I would that he knew more of the new musketry practice and less of plotting and scheming," said Styles.

When at the end of a week the surgeon announced that the danger point for Herrill had been passed Granville and Styles made great compliments to Joan who for the first time came down to join us at supper, thin and white but smiling.

"'Twill be long before he is strong again," she said. "He is better for he talked a little to-night before he fell asleep."

Joan turned to me.

"He has a notion that because he is injured and lies here as did Will Dyson he is paying a debt."

I said nothing, nor did the others; each of them knew the story of last winter. I daresay we all had our thoughts of a painful queer completeness in events. Presently Granville said, "This good news brings down the curtain for me at Splicing Oaks. To-morrow I must start for London. By this time I'll swear I am a renegade to some in the city."

Styles had less alacrity.

"I suppose I should be making for the north. Yet perchance His Majesty would not miss me for another week. The man is not yet nearly on his feet."

He looked enquiringly from one to the other.

"It would make us happy if you could rest with us awhile," said Joan. "We shall feel safer too."

"Your devoted servant always, Mistress Joan, if only for that most apt excuse."

That night when all had gone to bed I tore open Herrill's letter which I had carried with me in the intervening days while he lay between life and death, and here is what I read.

"Master Neame, I write this in the herdsman's hut at Sibertswold, with my ankle disabled, and at a drawback should enemies come upon me. I appreciate the help you have sent me in food and clothes, and I am grateful for the kindness of your sister which truly I do not deserve. For what your family has done you are justified in having information which has been kept from you, but my principal reason for writing this is that I may add some new sheltering for Cynthia if mishap should come to me. This cursed ankle may mean disaster at any hour.

"I was born of an old Leicestershire family, and as I have told you, my father was ruined by his service

to King James. I was a youth at Cambridge, not drowned in drink as many were, with some ambitions, and a good deal of industry. I had quick temper and impatience, faults which put a spur to bad fortune. I was eighteen when I met Joyce Wilford, a year younger than myself, and anything that was good in me caught fire at the sight of her. I was precipitate —intractable—but my love for Joyce Wilford never flickered. All my life was aglow. Perhaps it was because she was so different from me—gentle and soft-spoken, with kindliness always behind her quick spirits, and with the beauty of a flower. She found something in me—God knows what! She lived with a maiden aunt on the outskirts of Cambridge, and I saw much of her, and after a few months we were married. She had twenty pounds a year and I an irregular allowance from my father, and between us we set up a lodging which, small and ill-furnished, was a perfect nook of happiness. Before I had finished my college life a child was born to us. We called her Cynthia. The girl whom you have protected at Splicing Oaks is my daughter.

" I was pushing my father to use whatever influence he had at Court to get me employment when the mortgagees seized our home in Leicestershire. Within a fortnight my father was dead of a broken heart. My elder brother, weak in health was left to gather up the fragments to pay debts, and I took my young wife and my child to London to try to find a means of sustenance. I managed to see some of those who were around the King, including one or two who knew my father in the old days. I grew to think there was no such thing as friendship. A word of empty sympathy here and there, a shrug of the shoulders, a

promise that I should not be overlooked, and my clothes grew dingy as I economised the few guineas we had in store.

" Sir Thomas Wilford, who had disapproved my sudden marriage to his sister but who nevertheless had sent a gift and afterwards showed kindness in his letters, was away in the wars abroad. When he heard of my father's death and of what had happened to the estate, he sent Joyce and me an invitation to go to his country home at Waveney in Kent, and to live there as long as need be. Would to Heaven I had gone! I could at least have sent my wife and child to Waveney, where in the care of the old housekeeper and one or two servants they might have lived in safety and comfort till Wilford returned. I had an abutting pride, a resentment of failure, and thus we remained on in the rooms I had at Westminster. It was a woeful decision for which I have paid full measure.

" At last when I was well-nigh out at elbows I was given a small post as scrivener on the Board of Green Cloth attached to the Royal Palace, and I snatched at it like a hungry dog at a bone. I received a pittance for humble, almost menial, work. For a year this went on and I daresay my wife became sick of my irascibility, my rebellious words, and she must have felt too the privation from which I was unable to lift her.

" What with our poverty, the absence of friends, the hopelessness of the future and my selfish railing against fortune Joyce had more than she could bear. Mine was the blame. She had been thrust into hardships, isolated in a great city and she had to suffer me, a young man of high passions and disappoint-

ments. She must have gone mad; there is no other explanation. I came home one day to my lodging to find that she had fled leaving me a pitiful note that I should be relieved without her. She had been taken away by a gallant of the court who, unknown to me, had encountered her a month or so before, and had since sedulously paid court to her.

" I was stupefied, then full of a poignant marvelling. The world had slipped from underneath my feet. I was like a stricken animal void of understanding. When, after hours, conscious thought began to work in me again, I realised of how small account was I as a man. The night was breaking into day when little Cynthia in her cot began to cry for her mother. I took her up and nursed her, and she cuddled close to my breast, and all the warm blood in me went out to her. I cannot tell you what my baby meant to me then, and has meant to me ever since.

" I found that the seducer of my wife was a gallant named Lyall, an associate of the Duke of Buckingham, and that was the end of my immediate discoveries. I had a flash of commonsense, I hired a horse and took my baby to Wilford's place in Kent and left her in the care of the housekeeper.

" I need not carry you through my frenzied search when I returned to London. No one took interest in my enquiries. I was an insignificant scrivener, a poor creature who had not been able to keep his wife, that was all. I found out that Lyall had done some soldiering, had been a messenger to other lands for Buckingham who was all powerful with the King, that he had money and an intriguing spirit. It seemed probable that he had conveyed Joyce abroad for he was not the

kind of man to hide in some quiet country refuge with any woman whatever her attractions for him.

"After writing a letter to Sir Thomas Wilford, I forced myself, half demented as I was, to return to my work in the Palace because I foresaw that there, sooner or later, some trickle of gossip would guide to Lyall's whereabouts. But I had not to wait for this. Wilford was in the service of the King of Denmark under Sir Donald Mackay at Bremen, and he had gone to Mackay with my letter in his hand.

"Having the knowledge (which I lacked) that Lyall had previously been much in France, he made for Paris, and here after a week he found traces of Joyce and her abductor. Lyall had apparently been purchased by Richelieu, and found the opportunity for two treacheries in one. He had remained but a week in Paris and then accompanied by her whom he called wife he had struck across Europe on some mission for the Cardinal. Wilford followed him to Vienna, and from Vienna to Prague. There his search came to an end, just eight weeks after the flight of Lyall from London. In a little churchyard in Prague lay all that was left of Joyce. I do not think there can ever have been such a man as Lyall. His soul is surely deep in hell. Within a fortnight from the time he took her away he had showed her she was but a temporary plaything. Her protestations—I dare not think of them! Once he struck her in public. She was never strong in body, and she drooped and ailed, and in Prague became sick in earnest. He left her there, left her in a garret tended by an old woman in whose lap he dropped a handful of guineas when he went away. Joyce died two days before Wilford arrived, and though they said her death resulted from

a fever she was in all verity the victim of a cold deliberate murder. These facts did Wilford acquire while he spent many days probing to find the direction Lyall had taken. This time, however, the fellow had covered his footprints. Wilford came back to London to give his terrible tale, a tale which was the breaking point for me. I fell into a fever of the brain.

"Can you imagine the wrecked morose man who crept back to his work at the Board of Green Cloth a month or so hence? I had but one purpose, and even here satisfaction was to be taken from me. Wilford, during my illness, waylaid Buckingham with a demand as to Lyall, and received the astonishing answer that Lyall had already met his punishment. A duel in Rome had laid him low. 'His death,' said Buckingham, 'would no doubt save Wilford a lot of trouble.' I would willingly have joined Wilford on his return to the war on the continent, but my weakened state forbade it.

"I am at the point where first we met, for the steps by which I became usher at the King's school at Canterbury need not be retraced. Sufficient to say Wilford was again my friend. You will need no reminder of the kind of man I was. Now and again for an hour or so I became normal, cheered by the thought of my little girl, who it was agreed between us, should be brought up as the adopted daughter of Wilford, himself but recently a widower. But most of the time I was moody and brutal. The bitterness and hatred in me broke out on you helpless boys. No wonder you all loathed me. Paltry and silly as it seems I had a special animosity against you; you were bigger than the others, in some ways their leader, and were thought much of by the headmaster. You

—and all the rest for that matter—were being bullied by one who was not in his right mind.

"I revolted against the task of teaching as I daresay I should have revolted against any other peaceful task. Within six months of your blows on my head, blows better merited than any I have had before or since, I joined Wilford's regiment abroad and found at last an occupation which fitted me, and for which I had some natural parts. I served my apprenticeship to war with Wilford and afterwards I went far afield. I had no loyalty to party or to country; I went where advancement promised; I did not miss my share of it.

"Withal I was back in England from time to time, once a year when I could achieve it, to stay with Cynthia a week or two, to bring her some presents, to supplement Wilford's scanty store with such guineas as I had saved for her upkeep and instruction. Always was I hoping that by some stroke I might accumulate substantial gain which would assure her future. Luck did not come my way.

"Three years ago I found Cynthia shooting up into a beautiful young woman, and from that time I began to have fears about her, notwithstanding Wilford's protection. The seclusion of the Waveney house could not always be preserved for it was not conceivable that Wilford should avoid occasional visitors. He had made some prominence for himself, had been called into consultation by the King. Apart from this it was impossible that Cynthia should be permanently immured; she must be taken to London, shown at least some of the sights of life. Wilford had good friends, the Eures, the Verneys, the Hoptons—but I knew that Cynthia could not meet proper people, without meeting some evil ones also. I remembered

the character of many men who were around the court. I began to consider means by which I might settle down in England.

"A year ago when the trouble which is now in sight was setting minds astir, and my own in particular in so far as it afforded a prospect I had looked for, I received a letter from Wilford which brought me hither in haste. He said George Goring was pestering Cynthia, not in a way to be challenged, but showing her unwanted courtesies, displaying preference for her youthful talk, and in other directions making clear to the observant if not an infatuation something very like it. I came back prepared to pick a quarrel with him, and then obliterate the danger. This seemed to me the safest method; I knew his breed. Wilford dissuaded me. He had no definite charge, he said, and unless in extremity 'twould be well to run no risk of smirching Cynthia's name, such as might result from a fight with Goring. Watchfulness would be possible now that I was in England, and, if need should arise, why then strong action could be taken any day. I saw reason in what he said. We decided on a ruse, small protection indeed against such a man as Goring if he were bent on conquest, and yet in some degree a check on him and on others. I was a returned soldier of good family vouched for by Wilford, and was affianced to Cynthia his daughter. We knew that my past was long since buried and forgotten. In one of Hepburn's captains was not to be recognised the miserable scrivener at the Board of Green Cloth of fifteen years before. I was to be made known to Wilford's friends as occasion offered.

"Cynthia fell in with the plan at once; she was

delighted if only because it would enable us to be so much together. There you have the story, Master Neame, except this,—that in succeeding months, the months before the fatal business with your father at Canterbury I was seeking an opportunity for that fortune which might make Cynthia independent and happy for life.

"I write you these things plainly. By sad mischance you suffered a blow through Cynthia and myself, and poisonous as your words have been, and motives too for that, I see things in you I rank high, not least your stubbornness and disrespect to all who treat you haughtily.

"I came to your farm and had an impression of what home meant, and my boyhood in Leicestershire forced itself on me. I could not fail to notice Cynthia's friendly admiration for you. Your feelings are an open book. I have to be frank for I may be dead when you read these words. I do not know if Cynthia will ever think more of you than she does at this moment. I should have no reluctance to see her the wife of a man like yourself, and that is sufficient praise. She would have around her in your mother and sister women who are infinitely higher and more gracious than many of the so-called ladies of high family. Withal I have to say this—I wish Cynthia to choose for herself, and if her friendliness for you is but the passing phase of a young girl's gratitude and remorse, well then, you are man enough to understand it, and take no advantage of the words I am now writing to you.

"I am what is known as a wicked man and my gratitude does not count for much, but in so far as it is the expression of a father who has no thought but

for his daughter, I am indebted far more deeply than you will ever know to you, your mother and your sister for the happiness and security which have been Cynthia's while she has rested at Splicing Oaks. If I live I shall always feel safe while she is there; if I die I wish you to feel that I desire no better refuge for her in time of adversity or danger.

" JASPER HERRILL."

I went up to the top of the house to Joan's room and knocked at her door and roused her from sleep. She came out to me in her night attire, and saw Herrill's missive in my hand.

" You knew his secret," I said.

" I read that letter after he had written it in the herdsman's hut," she replied.

" Why should he have told you? "

" Why should he not? " said Joan with streaming eyes.

Then I knew Joan's secret as well as Herrill's.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

HAVE CONVERSATION WITH HERRILL

I WENT in to see Herrill during the morning after a warning from Joan that he was weak and that I must not weary him with long talk. He was indeed a frail white creature, very different from the hard and sinewy fighter I had known, yet there was restfulness in his eyes. He was not able to lift his arm from the coverlet but his fingers motioned a welcome and his voice, though faint, was clear enough.

He had little pain, he said, felt a lightening of his spirits every morning.

"We owe much to this house, Cynthia and I, more than we can ever pay, Geoffrey."

"Payment enough when you can eat a good dinner again," I said.

He smiled, and asked if there was news of Goring.

"No word at all. He's gone for good, I hope. But I have something else to tell you, and I hope you're strong enough to bear it."

"Not about Cynthia?"

"No, Cynthia is safe. The man Lyall."

"Lyall!"

"He lives. He is a friend of Goring's. 'Twas he who played the pedlar at Splicing Oaks. He was at Dover Castle though you saw him not."

Herrill wetted his lips with his tongue. "Lyall come to life!" he whispered.

"Wilford must have recognised him at York."

"He was not——?"

"Yes, it was Lyall who stood by Goring in the lane."

Herrill lay silent for a few seconds and then a queer little crackle of a laugh came from him.

"Panting out my heart to kill Goring while Lyall was in my reach!"

He closed his eyes and lay back inert.

"Joan," I cried, "Joan, where are you?" She hastened in as I called the second time. "He has fainted."

"I told you not to keep him too long," she said.

Consciousness crept back under Joan's ministrations with cordials and essences, and as soon as I saw his eyes open I went out to find Granville and Styles. To them both I read that part of Herrill's letter which told his history.

"Is that all he wrote?" asked Granville.

"No, but the rest is about Cynthia; it has no significance to any but myself."

A shade of thought came into Granville's eyes, but it passed.

"You travel to-day?" I said.

"As soon as I can make ready. I am thinking of this man Lyall; he has no ordinary courage. Wilford and Herrill and myself, and, though you cannot use a sword, there is yourself, Master Neame."

"Assuredly," I said.

"Four——"

"Five," said Styles. "Wilford is my oldest friend."

"Five, then," went on Granville. "He must know that every day has its possibilities."

"I have heard of him at intervals," said Styles. "He seems now the right-hand man of Goring, who is to advance him. In any chance encounter he has a vicious blade."

We fell to silence, each with his own thoughts; Styles was the first to speak.

"A great pother about a young girl, and she so unmeaning. I see one way in which she might relieve her friends, and give herself good armour."

"What is that?" I asked.

"She might marry."

Granville rose to his feet. "Yes, she might do that. Now, Master Neame, with your permission I must put myself in order for the journey."

"I'll walk with you to the stables," I said.

On the further side of the carthouse I gave Granville Herrill's letter to read in its entirety. As he folded the paper and handed it back to me he said calmly, "What is your purpose, Master Neame?"

"I would not like her to know of her father's inclinations."

"Wise man. Else you might damn yourself completely."

"This in confidence?" said I, a little harder by reason of his manner.

"Fear not. A confidence for you in return, Master Neame. I am not indifferent to this lady whom we may now call Mistress Herrill."

"'Twas not hid."

"Do you seek out Mistress Herrill?"

"No. I have bethought myself."

"We all have our delicacies. I travel from here to see Mistress Herrill."

"Shall we go round to the stables?" said I.

I might have known Granville's purpose but I had much to occupy me in the slow progress of Herrill, in my own thoughts and surmises, in never-ending talk with Joan. Moreover, harvest was near and Will was

all for putting scythe to the barley without lingering. The wheat was almost ripened, he pointed out, and we should be over-burdened with the cutting unless we made an early start.

Styles, stripped to shirt and breeches, joined with zest in the building of new stedalls in the rickyard.

"This farming has its intricacies," he said. "My faggots were replaced with stern words from old Thompson this morning."

It was on the morning I sent four men to begin the cutting of the barley, that Granville rode up the lane accompanied by Cynthia, and she was calling out to us before she was off her horse, and I, bare-armed and naked at the throat, was fluttering like a boy as I ran to hold her stirrup, and Joan came flying out to take her in her arms as soon as she was on the ground. Granville stood by smiling.

"I reassured my friends in town, which took a day or more, then went to Lady Hopton's house in Kensington and gave my tidings, and here we are."

"You never told me," I said.

"You proclaimed you would not go for Mistress Herrill; it was thus my welcome duty."

That morning was in a fog for me: Cynthia with her father, Joan running in and out to them, mother perturbed with Lizzie Barton about the dinner and the unwonted coolness of the oven, Styles and Granville in talk by themselves, I in everybody's way with no coherent thoughts to call my own.

A hundred explanations must have been given and received by Cynthia in her converse with Joan during the day but at supper and after, discussion was of the future rather than of the past. Mother was insistent that Cynthia should remain for the present at Splicing

Oaks, this in face of Cynthia's assertion that Waveney had good accommodation and that she could come over every day.

"Your place is by your father. When he is able to be moved it will be time enough to talk of Waveney."

Granville told us he was to leave on the morrow; the King was gathering his forces, he said, and Essex had been given command of the Parliament's army.

Styles was lugubrious.

"I ought to be on the move too, I suppose."

Joan shook her finger at him, "Just when we need you for the harvest. You are tired of the hard work, that's what it is."

"For you a few days more or less—His Majesty will not repine," said Granville.

"Well, then," said Styles, brightening up, "I'll rebut this accusation of cowardice from Mistress Joan."

I was the silent one of the party, and indeed I had much to reflect on then, and after I got to bed, in Cynthia's altered manner to me. Cordiality she had, but it was touched with a new reserve, some hint of dignity too. She seemed to have grown older by a year or so. On the occasion she spoke to me by name it was "Master Neame" in place of "Geoffrey." Yet, be it said, the change in her was such that no one but myself might notice it for she spoke keenly about the calves and the young pigs and the coming harvest, told how she had already planned to help with the turning of the barley, and to have her dinner in the field with the men—sitting on a turned-down sheaf behind a shock of wheat.

She was up be-times in the morning, and she was full of joy as she hastened from one part of the homestead to another, renewing old acquaintance with barn and

chestnut tree, with the horses in the stable, and old Thompson tending them, with the cows in the grass looking up at her wonderingly. She took from Joan the feeding of the fowls, scampered to the dairy at the sound of the milk pails, and afterwards ran to me, and, forgetting herself for the nonce, asked with a mock demureness if I would guide her to the barley field to see the men at work.

Then it was that Granville came upon us, elegant in dress, easy in manner and begged a few words with her before his departure.

"You go so soon?" said Cynthia.

"I dine at Canterbury. Master Neame will forgive this robbery, 'tis not for long."

They went off together to the orchard where I could see them walking up and down. I demeaned myself to watch them from a corner of the wood house.

Sometimes they were obscured from sight by the trees, but what I saw had an import that could not be mistaken. In their very openness was a significance.

Granville was talking to her eagerly and softly and she was looking up at him. As they strung their way between the trees I saw her smiling, and then she put her hand on to his arm and stopped him to say some earnest word. At the end I saw him bow low and kiss her hand.

Will had Granville's horse outside the stable door, and I took the rein from him and led the animal out into the lane, where a minute later Granville joined me all ready for departure.

"I came hither that we might not be overheard," I said. "You told me that you had thoughts of Mistress Herrill, I wish to be without any doubt. Do you seek to make her your wife?"

"You speak the truth," he said. "I would it were any other man than you, Master Neame."

"Is it settled between you and Mistress Herrill?"

"Not so; I have my hopes. Let us say no more on that to-day."

"She will be happy with you."

He looked at me for a moment.

"I do not think she would marry a man for his possessions or his surroundings."

"No," I said.

He mounted his horse and then held out his hand. "The best of weather for the harvest."

"Good fortune, and good roads," I replied.

If I had depressions I strove to show them not and I took Cynthia for excursions to the harvest field, discovered to her the nest of young partridges and the home of a bumble-bee full of honey, and started her on a friendship with Peter Styles, who I knew had a deal to give her that was entertaining.

From dawn to sunset now I was in the field, and sweat was running down my face most of the time between meals. Yet at night I would try to top a jest from Peter Styles, sometimes to make one for myself, and Joan, radiant with a new-found happiness, would remark on my attempt at gaiety.

"You needed this harvest work to take away your glumness."

Cynthia looked at me in a questioning kind of way.

When Herrill was well enough to sit up in bed I talked with him about Cynthia, and he agreed with me that in the light of what was now known persons and circumstances might have a different aspect, and then he asked me where my remark was meant to lead.

"Do you know that Granville is in love with Cynthia?"

"I imagined something of the sort."

"And if she chooses him?"

"I would prefer she felt that way towards a yeoman like Geoffrey Neame than to a baronet like Sir Edward Granville."

"Such matters are not for contriving outside a girl's heart."

"I would not have her marry in any loveless way, nor would she do it."

"Yet she is often over-tender," I said. "She carries the light services of others too heavily in mind. For instance, she would not take the man she loved if she thought 'twould injure you, her father, or even pain you deeply."

"I think I see your point," said Herrill.

"Sir Edward Granville owns an historic name, has an estate of four thousand acres in Sussex, is, so I am told, the owner of a patent of land in Virginia in America. If ill should befall his property in this struggle he could take a wife to as large an estate over the ocean and make her there a spacious and happy home."

"There is none to dispute it," said Herrill.

"'Tis fortunate then that feelings in myself towards her have passed to a different state."

"What?" cried Herrill.

"I shall always honour and admire her but I have come to see she is no mate for a farmer."

"I am not to be deceived, Geoffrey."

"Confession is distasteful but I have to make it. I am not the first young man to be foolish. I was glamoured with her—that is all."

Herrill sighed. "It is one way out," he said weakly.

I went from the room with a bubbling in my veins, and when I got down to the kitchen I heard Will Dyson calling for me through the kitchen door.

"The bull!" he cried. "The bull is after Sefton in the yard."

I ran out with him to the railings and saw the young bull, always of a nasty temper, with tail erect and head lowered, chasing poor Sefton who was struggling knee-deep, through the litter to escape the onrush. I was over the rails in an instant, but before I could get near Sefton had stumbled down. He flung up his hand to protect himself and I was conscious that one of the bull's sharp horns slashed it. I was on them before further damage could be done, and my coming caught the angered eyes of the bull, and checked him for a second. I took him by the tail and swung him round on to the hard surface by the gate, which enabled Sefton to crawl away, and then the bull turned on me. I dashed in and caught his horns, one in each hand. He made an attempt to prod me, and I felt the strength of him and we stood there straining, for he was three quarters grown, and was very strong about the shoulders. But my temper was as high as his own and I wrenched at him with all my strength and felt him give way a little. He was furious to do me injury but in two minutes I had him beaten. With one last mighty heave I turned him over and flung him on his back with all my force. The men came running up.

"Look to him when he rises," I said panting.

He did not rise. Later they dragged him out into the open by the stables to cut him up for beef.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE HARVEST HOME

I HAD some strange comfort to my heart in the way the great ricks rose one after the other, symmetrical, and of perfect building, towering structures, symbols of strength and plenty, the witness of our year's work and the goodness of the soil. The work itself was a healing draught. The activity of every hour, the rumble of the laden wains, the valiant straining of the trace horses, the shouted directions of Will, our principal rick builder, the smell of ripened straw, the call of the partridges in the new stubble, the flavour of bread and cheese and ale in the shade of a hedge, and at night the delicious fatigue, all these things helped to take away oppression.

Cynthia, conscious of a changed current in her life, had pain at my avoidance of her even while burdened with that avowal which sooner or later would have to be made to me. I had my share of imagination and could penetrate her thoughts. Once or twice I found her looking at me in sad fashion and I knew she was reproaching herself, and I almost lost my hold and was on the edge of some encouragement to her.

Herrill had steadily improved, and on the day the last of the wheat ricks was half up, he was helped downstairs by Joan and Cynthia, propped up by cushions in the big armchair in the kitchen and that evening had to listen to Peter Styles' exposition of the mysteries of rick building, which he said might well be studied by soldiers who had

in mind the value of rapidly devised defences in open country. Bundles of rushes or of grass could be similarly locked together so as to be for a time impenetrable to cavalry. He wondered Gustavus Adolphus had not given it his attention.

The next day there were other matters to think of, for the carrier brought Herrill a letter from Sir Thomas Wilford at Nottingham, with information which shook me from head to foot and made Peter Styles' eyes sparkle and set the whole house in agitation. These are the passages which Herrill read out to us:

"The die is cast. Here these three days gone the King's standard has been raised and unless the Parliament responds to approaches which are now to be made we are at war and Englishmen will soon be cutting Englishmen's throats. The standard was hoisted for three days in succession so that all the countryside might flock around it, and at the Royal table Rupert prophesied that from far and near they would come, a hundred thousand at the least. Here was over-statement, for, notwithstanding that some of the trained bands were with us, the total horse and foot was not more than two thousand and perhaps as many more who were country people not yet soldiers. Withal 'twas something of a pageant, for the standard with several poles, like a city streamer at the Lord Mayor's Show, needed twenty supporters, and on the top of the banner was hung a flag with the King's arms quartered with a hand pointing to the Crown with this motto 'Give Cæsar his due.' There were several knights, baronets and three troops of horse to wait upon the standard and to bear the same backwards and forwards with about six hundred foot of soldiers.

"I find hope in the fact that the English people are loyal and will come to the aid of their monarch. Our general purpose—it is not hidden from anyone or I could not write it—is to march south towards London when we have banded and assembled some twenty regiments of foot and fifteen of horse.

"Granville was a very welcome person to see and I rejoice at your recovery from that dastard's bullet. Until you feel fit to join us and have a mind to do so I entreat that you and Cynthia make your home at Waveney which, be it known to you, I have so willed that on my death the whole shall belong to her. I have good report of the Neames, mother, son and daughter, and unite my good feeling and gratitude with yours for their kindness to Cynthia. Goring is at Portsmouth and has declared for the King. So much for his machinations with Pym. I'll swear he'll betray us once again. The Queen is his friend. I suppose Lyall is with him. More on this shall pass between us.

"In the coming and going between here and London Granville is like to be one of the chosen messengers and if it is possible for him to spare two days he will ride to Kent with all that is latest, but you must not reckon too much upon his coming, for events may move again."

Herrill read no further, stating there were private matters in the letter. "I have given you enough," he said.

He had indeed. Tyranny and rebellion had there been but all the time deep within us was the idea that from this smother of quarrelling, with now and again a flare of violence, agreement would work its way to the front.

" Charles has his will at last," said Herrill, calmly.

" God would not let anybody fight against the King? " said my mother.

Joan, fussing with Herrill's cushions, said: " You at least can take no part. We can thank Goring for something. There are worse things than a bullet wound at such a time as this."

" Less would have kept me from the contention; nevertheless it may prove convenient."

" What of you, Geoffrey? You cannot be wasted," said Styles. " You are a King's man."

" Am I? Perhaps I am."

New life had come to me with this tremendous news from Wilford. I caught Cynthia looking at me, her lips in a bow with surprise.

" You cannot fight for the King," she said. " How can you? "

" I thought you were the most ardent royalist of all, Cynthia," I said laughing.

I felt better hearted than in any hour since I had faced the position about Cynthia and Granville, but I sobered my face, for Cynthia had no answering mirth.

" It is wicked, quite wicked; you don't believe in the King's cause."

" Papist or Puritan," said Herrill. " Take your choice, Geoffrey."

" He's neither," said my mother. " He's a Protestant."

Then Joan put her hand on my arm: " Stay and take care of us."

" You'll be safe with Master Herrill, he is a better guard than I. When will the King move, think you? " I said to Peter.

" From Wilford's letter 'twill be many days in all. likely a week or so."

"I'll stay till the harvest home," I said. "By that time Granville will be here and I shall have fresh guidance."

"It is not certain Sir Edward Granville will be able to come from London to Kent," said Joan.

"You may be sure that Granville will come here," I said.

I went out to the rickyard in good spirits; prison doors had been opened for me.

True to my forecast, Granville made the journey down to Splicing Oaks from London, was with us the week after Wilford's letter and two days before the gathering in the small barn which was to mark the end of the harvest. Our practice was to complete the thatching before the harvest home and then to have a meal spread one evening, to which everyone was invited, men, women, and children. A little sheaf of wheat with ribbons tied to the top of it would be in the middle of the table, and everybody would be dressed in their best, and after the meal there would be songs and sometimes a dance or two. The extra harvest money would be paid out, and in a good year it was likely to be supplemented, everybody receiving from one shilling to five shillings as a present.

"These are hours stolen from the King," said Granville at supper-time. "I propose to encroach upon your bounty for a full day."

"Two days," said Joan. "Stay for the harvest home."

"The family gathering of Splicing Oaks," said Cynthia, "something to be remembered. Father and I have forced ourselves upon the party."

"'Twill mean an all night ride for me, but if I am permitted——"

"Perchance you'll have to sing a song," said Joan.

"Or dance the corranto with Mistress Tulks," suggested Herrill.

"All visitors pay their footing with some new excitement," explained Cynthia. "I am thinking of what my effort shall be."

Before we went to bed that night I learned that men were coming in fast to join the force of the King, that Wilford was well of his wound, and Peter Styles was drilling with great energy serving-men, labourers and tatterdemalions who were to form his regiment. Supplies of arms had been obtained. The King's troops would be on the move within a fortnight.

In the morning while Granville went with the women to see them spread the table in the barn, I detained Herrill with my mind made up, for I knew the crisis was upon me.

"You told Cynthia?"

"Told her what?"

"That I had conquered my fever for her."

"Why, no."

"What! All this time and she has not learned it——"

"You meant well, but you must come down to earth, Geoffrey."

"Come down to earth?"

He reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. "Cynthia is no angel. She will always be grateful, always have affection for you, but she is self-reliant. She knows you can take a blow."

"You think I make no difference to her?"

"I think this, that if she has found within herself a love for Granville—and there are signs of it—she will tell us of it when the time arrives for her to do so. Think for yourself, you know her well."

I was looking blankly at Herrill with a queer ache in me.

"You leave me no covering," I said.

"It is a time when one man can say to another little of comfort. Have I not felt the hollowness myself? Life is not ended for you."

"You have been very good," said I. "What is to happen now?"

"We must expect that Granville will to-day put the matter to the issue. He goes back to the King. Cynthia and I will leave to-morrow or the next day for Waveney."

"I fear I have been a puling boy."

"Take it cheerfully when it comes, Geoffrey."

"As best I may."

"There never was a better lad to rest on," said Herrill, and then we walked over to the barn to observe busy hands and listen to busy tongues.

I bent myself to work, and carried in the two cold sirloins, the big veal pie, the baskets of bread and cheese, and fetched on my shoulder the nine gallon cask of old ale, putting it on a wooden stand in the corner and tapping it.

Joan and Cynthia were bringing stools and chairs, mother deciding the size of the table and where everyone should sit, Lizzie Barton and Ned Tulks' wife making a to-do with knives and platters. Joan came up behind me, and encircled my neck with coloured ribbons and ran away, but I caught her, and holding her high above my head tossed her on the stacked oats which filled one side of the barn. We all laughed at her entreaties for help; it was Cynthia who carried in the short ladder to help her down.

In the evening, just as the folk were beginning to

assemble, I saw Granville in the orchard, walking slowly and full of thought.

"You will bring Cynthia in?" I said.

"I am waiting for her now. I want to have private speech with her. It has been difficult through the day."

"I would like you to know that I wish you and her great happiness."

His face was all life.

"I wish I had your spirit, Master Neame."

I went on speaking quickly: "I have been terribly in love with Mistress Herrill and shall never be able to look upon a woman in the same way again. I could not hope to make her mine; it was presumption. I have told her father that my feeling for her has changed, hoping thus to spare her the hindrance of pity for one who had been able to serve her. It was a lie, I never loved her more. I spoke without need for she is too sensible to have allowed any paltering with this great thing that has come to you and her. I do my best now to put her in the background of my thoughts. Good fortune to you both."

I was away before he could say anything and strode back into the barn into which the people were now drifting. The old cobbler was there with his viol in a cloth case.

"Pestron," said I, "have a mug of ale and then give them a lively jig of a tune while they are finding their places."

I called for Will Dyson.

"Down to the cellar, Will," I said, "and get two bottles of sack and two bottles of canary: we have high company here to-night."

We were a score or more all told, and in a regular babel Mother and Joan placed the guests in their allotted order round the big table, which had been made of boards

covered with white cloths. I had a seat at the head, with mother on my right and Herrill next, with Joan by his side. On my left were places for Cynthia and Granville.

When all present had settled down and had begun to help themselves from the platters in front of them, Granville and Cynthia were still absent.

"Where are they?" asked Herrill, leaning over the table to speak to me.

"In the orchard. I am keeping the wine to open when they come."

A full ten minutes passed without a sign of them and mother was getting anxious, and Joan was making ready to go on a search when Granville came in round the corner of the half-opened door of the barn. His face was flushed, his eyes dancing, and he raised his hand to the company, and a shout of welcome went up.

"We got the gentry here to-night!"

"Here's to the lord!"

"Bravo, Sir Edderd."

And then there was a call: "Where's the lady?"

"What have you done with Mistress Cynthia?"

"We want Mistress Cynthia."

Granville, very upright, with a bright smile stopped before he reached the head of the table to answer:

"Mistress Cynthia follows. She begged me to ask your pardon for her, 'tis but a slight delay."

He came round to me and spoke in my ear: "Cynthia wants you to go to her."

"Now? Cannot I hear it later? We'll all hear it together——"

"She particularly desires to speak to you herself and alone."

I rose to go out with the only querulous thought I had

ever had about Cynthia; she might have spared me this. She had a sense of obligation to me, I supposed. I told Herrill and Joan where I was going. "Open a bottle of wine," I said. "We must toast them as soon as I come back with her."

Joan reached out and gave my hand a little pat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CYNTHIA IS HERSELF

I SAW her thirty yards away, her face half hidden in the fading light, and her steps quickened towards me as I came in sight.

"Geoffrey, I had to send for you. I could not wait."

"Granville says you have something to tell me."

Try as I would I could not help the unsteadiness in my voice.

"I could not let an hour more go by without your knowing."

"Come back into the orchard," I said.

I led her on to the grass amid the trees, noted her agitation, and grew sorry that she should have put the task upon herself.

"Don't make yourself unhappy this night of all nights," I said.

"Geoffrey, I have never been able to be quite open with you, and you of course could not be open with me, but I have tried harder than you, I have indeed."

"This is the end, Cynthia, and no harm done. We need have no pretences to-night."

"Truly I will have no pretences from this night forward, from this hour forward. You know why I have sent for you?"

"You have sent for me to tell me you are in love."

She gave a little gulping laugh, and I hoped she would not be hysterical.

"Yes, that is something I have to tell. Can you imagine it, Geoffrey? I, Cynthia Herrill, must needs

have you hear my love concerns. Am I so brazen? No, not that."

Her words flowed rapidly and I could feel the strain in her. We had stopped in our walk, and were face to face, and her hands were wrestling in and out of each other.

"I force upon you what is in my heart. I do not fear what you may think of me. You have the right to hear. I would not have it otherwise. I would have sent for you a hundred times."

"We are old friends," I mumbled.

"You shall know it all. Who else should I tell first? Sir Edward Granville has done me the honour within the hour to ask my hand in marriage."

"Aye, he would do that."

"He spoke honourably about you. He told me little I did not know except as to your mind in this last week or two. That is why I have sent for you. That and something else."

"I cannot see that there was wrong in it. I know not what I say to-night, Cynthia. I am not man enough——"

"It is I who should be humiliated, Geoffrey, not you. Bear with me, please, and answer me very thoughtfully. Allowing your good wish to spare me, to let me go to Granville if I would—has there not been some little shifting in your heart since you read father's letter? I was unattainable before. There is this too, my mother and her story. Perhaps you had some doubts—I am her daughter ——"

"I could not help loving you, Cynthia. I do not know why you should have called me hither. It is wounding me every minute. Since you ask me, yes, I have loved you and love you still. If you were the poorest girl or the richest girl 'twould be just the same, and I could not

weigh whether you were good in heart or lovely in face, for it would make no difference."

My voice was hoarse.

"I would not put a bad face upon this affair between you and Granville. But you have been my soul and heart, Cynthia. Neither is my own since I have known you. I am besotted. I shall always be besotted. Let us go in now——"

I turned, but she was in front of me before I could move a step.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she cried.

Bells began to ring within my heart.

"I have never been able to help it any more than you have."

Her two tiny hands were thrust into my big one, just as they were in London.

"I have never wanted to help it. I felt the message in you was from some long distance and I had been coming to you ever since I was born."

"I am only a yeoman," I muttered, but I had her in my arms now very closely and very tenderly, for she was slight and fairy-like.

She said again: "Oh, my dear, my dear," and then we neither of us spoke for a long time.

Presently with one hand I unfastened her hood and stroked her hair, and she gave a sigh of contentment and tried to nestle to me more closely.

"I thought you had become fond of Granville," I said.

"No, no, how could I?"

"I am not of your class and he was a better mate——"

She looked up with amazement.

"I could not have any other mate than you. How could I?"

I nodded, for now I was as foolish as herself.

"No, it would not be right."

"And I will always do all you wish, Geoffrey," she said, and she crept close to me again. Then was I swept off my feet.

"Oh, Cynthia, I pray that I may make you happy."

"You could not help it," she said.

Presently the music of Pestron's viol came to us from the distance, and I remembered Granville and spoke of him. Cynthia lifted her head from my breast.

"He is kind and manly. I have feared since father's letter that he would speak but he said nothing to me of love till an hour ago. Before he went away I understood what he would wish. I could do nothing; you were aloof. I could but wait. To-night he told me of your words and how you desired to stand aside without complaint because you thought I loved him."

"There must be something in good blood."

"I told him everything. You will think I have no shame left in me. So it was that he came to send you out to me."

"He would not thank us for pity. He carried himself well."

Slowly she drew herself away from me: "Geoffrey, we must go back to the supper. They will all be wondering——"

"Come, then," I said, and I placed her arm within mine.

As we neared the barn we found that Pestron was singing a song and we stood outside behind the door and listened. What mattered words and time to us; no song in Paradise could have been sweeter. We were side by side, she leaning on me, and her hand was passing up and down my sleeve. This was Pestron's song:—

"THE MEN OF KENT"

The men of Kent,
With parts so blent
No men were ever like 'em.
A head they'll dent,
With good intent
There's no wrongs but they'll right 'em.

They're as strong as their barley brew;
There's nought that they can't do:
From farming to fighting,
Hunting and kiting:
And the maids know they can woo.

The men of Kent,
They'll ne'er be bent,
Though loyal to king and nation.
By heaven lent,
They're plainly meant
To hold a special station.

They're as strong as their barley brew;
There's nought that they can't do:
From farming to fighting,
Hunting and kiting:
And the maids know they can woo.

Amid the cheering no one could hear that Cynthia clapped her hands as vigorously as any. She pulled at my arm to speak to me, and I lifted her so she could whisper in my ear.

" I've got a man of Kent," she said.

We walked into the barn hand in hand, and the noise fell away and all eyes were towards us.

" Here's the master! " cried Will Dyson, and then everyone rose up and some cried " Huzza," and some stamped on the floor, and some thumped the table, and Ned Tulks, greatly daring, patted me on the back as I passed him. It was as though I had arrived from a journey, and Cynthia was excited and half frightened.

Granville was as loud as any in his welcoming shouts, but his face was white. As we turned round the head of the table Herrill left his place to take Cynthia and to kiss her.

He remained on his feet while the gathering settled down and then he said, " It is fitting that I should tell you the news. My daughter, Mistress Herrill, is to be married to your master, Geoffrey Neame. God bless them both."

I do not think he could have said any more, for weak in body he was overdone by the suddenness and gladness of what had come to pass. I had seen Herrill, man of iron that he was, face powerful enemies with a smile, and look at death without trembling, but now in this gathering of humble folk he was very nearly broken down. He had need of Joan's strong and kindly arms to help him to his seat.

In the joyous turmoil that arose, with the men once more hammering their fists on the table, Will Dyson crying, " I always told you so," and old Pestron trying to make a tune heard, and Ned Tulks clouting his boy on the head for shouting at the top of his voice—my mother had taken Cynthia in her arms and both of them were weeping. Quietness came when it was seen that Granville was on his feet, glass in hand.

"Fill your glasses and your mugs. Let us drink to the happiness of your master and his bride. You know him as a good farmer, and I know him as a gallant gentleman. Mistress Herrill has all the graces, more, she will prove a brave and loving wife. Let us drink to them."

Drink they did, with another burst of noise, and all I could do was to nod my head to Granville. He did not need me to say anything.

At the end of the supper, which had lasted a good hour and a half, Will Dyson, Ned Tulks and Sefton helped Lizzie Barton make clear the barn floor, carrying platters and knives and spoons back to the kitchen, and then taking down the trestles and boards which made the tables and standing them by the side of the barn where some of the harness was hanging. While this was going on the women were crowding about Cynthia, making their curtsies and she was all tremulousness, and tried to ask after their welfare and held fast to her father's hand most of the time. Her eyes were glistening and she would look round every minute to see what I was doing. Sometimes she would break into a smile at my mother's introduction of the women folk. Always to me she appeared entrancing. The angular sister of Thompson who helped us with the brewing, Lizzie Barton's black-haired cousin from Eastry, Mistress Bonny from the Bull, Pestron's daughter of eighteen, Sefton's sister, all came forward, the older ones no way abashed, and the younger pushed to the front by Joan. After that some of the men sidled up to Cynthia and she was more at ease, having known most of them. She made rough old Thompson shake hands with her, which embarrassed him very much.

"God bless 'ee," said he.

When Jeremy Eason held out to her a bunch of wild

pansies, she took them and put them in her breast and pronounced him a courtier, and he backed away blushing, not knowing what she meant.

In the midst of the bustle and ferment I went out to the house to fetch the bag of silver from the box under my bed, and when I got back Herrill and Granville had disappeared, and while I was calling up the people one by one to pay them all three shillings for one to mark the day, Herrill slipped in again and came around and stood behind me. He found the opportunity to whisper a word or two.

"He sent his affection and goodwill to all. 'Twas no time for good-byes," he said. "I helped him saddle his horse."

CHAPTER THIRTY

A BEGINNING AND AN END

SIR THOMAS WILFORD sent a letter which conveyed his blessing to Cynthia, and also a good message to Herrill.

"Cynthia is as dear to me as any daughter could be," he wrote. "And though she may be married I'll not forego the sweet affection and duty she has always borne to me. She would not wish it. I cannot think of any young woman who could make a man so happy. I would that Cynthia had chosen one of greater rank than Master Neame, one, moreover, who was more warmly affected towards His Majesty. I have said the worst of him. He is a man who has carried himself strongly in divers affairs. If Cynthia can be happy on his farm, well then I know there could not be a better Englishman to preserve her. No enemy can reach her in that haven. When the King has overcome his enemies I shall beg leave to taste a yeoman's hospitality.

"That you have found a wife in Master Neame's sister rounds the story. I trust it may mean happiness for you; life owes you something. I am sure she has good qualities; 'tis yeoman stock, but proud and hard as that which has a higher name.

"If you are determined not to draw a sword in this brief though serious conflict you cannot do better than repair to Waveney, since Cynthia finds a new home at Splicing Oaks; I had always planned Waveney for

her. Do you, therefore, take your bride to Waveney and strike what sustenance you can from its fifty acres, affording me a harbour when I shall come to you sometimes. We shall have this Parliament rabble on the run before the end of the year, and if I come through the trouble with safety—I am near the person of the King—I am assured of office and high station which will keep me months on end in London. When the King is once more ruling his country many changes will follow, and I have no doubt of suitable employment for you."

Herrill and I did not share Wilford's outlook; we expected the struggle to be short, but with victory for the Parliament, for if we discounted the violence of fanatics such as those who had sacked the cathedral at Canterbury we knew the feeling among work-a-day people in town or country. Not a yeoman but what was for the Parliament. Only a few weeks before a band of Dover citizens had climbed the hill and wrested the castle from the royal soldiers. We thought that Wilford might need a refuge and a home very soon. We all wished him with us in safety. Cynthia prayed that he might accompany us when we four went to Eastry church to be wedded.

And so we waited on through the days while the blackberries ripened, and the haws took on a shade of red, till the elms began to lay their golden carpet of leaves, until, indeed, some of the land was prepared in readiness for putting in the autumn wheat.

One stormy day with the gulls from the coast circling above the meadows, a rider came along the road from the north, and I, being the first to see him and to recognise him, gave a shout which brought everyone in the

house out into the wind and rain. Joan, Herrill and Cynthia came running down towards me at the gateway. The rider was Peter Styles—a much disordered Peter, for his cloak was tattered, showing a workman's jerkin beneath, while his plumed hat was replaced by one of plain felt much the worse for wear. His horse, a poor, bony creature, was almost foundered by heavy riding. Yet he was the old Peter, just the same—his eyes twinkling, his moustache bristling, and over all a jauntiness which served as part cover for his dilapidations. I helped him from his horse, for he was stiff, and gave him a shake of the shoulders by way of greeting, and then he made his bow to Joan and Cynthia and kissed their hands.

"It looks like home," he said.

"What of Wilford?" asked Herrill.

"Good news and yet indifferent, and no man ever worked harder to bring it. I stole this horse from a meadow outside Ashford. He took the stead of a miserable creature I had from a farmer's cart at Guildford—there a substitute was necessary for the Parliament nag with which I broke through the crush near Warwick."

"The King is defeated!" exclaimed Herrill.

"And the Parliament too. Both sides are running away from each other. I was carried into a bunch with Verney who bore the King's standard. They killed him, though they offered him quarter first. My sword was broken so they tied my wrists together and carried me off. I broke away two nights later and here I am. Wilford is with the King—a scratch or two, nothing more."

We were to have additions to the story after Peter Styles had been refreshed with a good meal.

"Our position was on high ground near a place known as Edgehill. The King had spent the night in a country tavern called 'The Sunrise Inn,' and his two boys looked out of the windows and saw the battle. The Parliament people were spread along in the valley beneath us. I was with Sir Jacob Astley who commanded the foot, and the old man had his anxieties about the half-trained companies, brave enough but blundersome. He encouraged the men, then made a little prayer. 'Oh, Lord, Thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget Thee do not Thou forget me. March on, boys.'

"We huddled down hill, and they came forward a little to meet us, and then Rupert's cavalry on our right went through the Parliament foot like a knife through butter. I had just time to see two regiments clash on our left, hand to hand—yokels pushing and stabbing each other—when Essex's horse was on us and my men went down like ninepins. Most were trampled under foot. In the torrent I was swept along to the fringe of the King's Guards who themselves were broken. I stood by Wilford, gave him some small service, and while he, with some others, manœuvred the King away I was left with Verney. That is the finish of it. Both sides will say they won. We lost heavily in leaders, but Essex marched his army away towards Warwick. 'Twas in the confusion there I managed my escape."

We had further light on the battle three days afterwards in a letter which Wilford had sent by a friend to London from whence it was brought to us by the carrier. I give a passage from it.

"Sir Edmund Verney, brave old man, who doubted the King's wisdom but knew his duty to his royal master, killed six of the enemy, and they only secured

the standard by severing the hand which held it. I should not be writing this letter to you now but for my old friend Peter Styles. We had been put in disarray by the enemy horse, some of us were keeping clear the King's retreat, and I had four at me not far from where Verney stood, when Styles pushed through to help. He killed one of the men, made diversion with the others. We were separated as he hacked his way through to Verney. We have not found his body, and it may be he has been taken prisoner. I should not be alive but for the onrush he made."

"You seem to have had a busy hour, Colonel Styles," said Herrill.

"A mere scramble," replied Styles.

Cynthia had him by the hand. "You are a very brave man," she said.

"I am a very thirsty one. I wonder, Geoffrey, if I could have another pint of the old ale."

Wilford would not be with us now for months, that was plain, and Herrill and I rode over to see Parson Blechynden. What avoidance of us on our return to the farm! What high colour in cheeks and assumed amazement when mother at dinner began to question us! Joan suddenly remembered the orchard gate unfastened against the cows in the paddock, and got up to go and see to it. Cynthia went flying after her. "Foolish girls!" said my mother. "Oh, I don't know," said Herrill, whereupon Peter Styles remarked, "And Master Herrill almost as nervous as they are."

When in the afternoon I had Cynthia by herself I reproached her for being a coward. "It only seems too strange to be true," she said; "I am frightened at my own happiness, that is all." She clung to me.

Three weeks later was the double wedding, and I did not know how many friends we had until that day. When we reached the church we found it crowded, and I never saw so many women at a service except perhaps on Easter Sunday, and I recognised people from as far afield as Ash, and Betteshanger and Barnsole. Squire Boteler was seated in the front near Cousin Stephen Brockman from Dover. On the other side of the nave was Squire Dill who had ridden from Wingham, and Host Paramor from Canterbury, the latter having brought six bottles of Canary with him as a present. Mistress Bonny had squeezed herself in a place by the side of Will Dyson near the pillar with the Dominical circle on it.

Herrill, myself and Peter Styles were in new clothes, and on the evening before I had imagined what a brave show we should make, but now I knew it was not for any of us that the women in the pews bent themselves forward with much rustling and whispering, but because of Cynthia and Joan, surely the two most beautiful brides who ever walked up the aisle of Eastry Church.

I forgot all my nervousness, and was like to burst with pride and joy at the sight of Cynthia. I had a suffocating feeling. And Joan—very natural and lovely was Joan, and you could not have told her from a lady of gentle birth, yeoman's daughter as she was.

I was in a blur as I stood there with Cynthia by my side, and they told me afterwards that I was the only one of the four who stuttered and fumbled with the responses to Parson Blechynden. Herrill was not quite himself but his deep tones were decided. It was Joan and Cynthia who spoke out clearly and could be heard all over the church. Perhaps this was because everybody was listening so intently to hear them.

Cobbler Pestron, who for many years had been sexton at the church, once or twice joined with the Parson in his questions, and was afterwards reproved for it by the Squire, though at the time it seemed to me to be all part of the service. When the hymn was announced Will Dyson started before anybody else, which made those around look at him and drew upon him an angry stare from the Squire. Will cared not at all. He was always a few words ahead of the rest of the people, and to make up for it he sang "Amen" loudly three times at the end.

As we came out to the churchyard all flocked around us under the big trees, and made much of Joan and Cynthia, and children were hanging on to their skirts, and mother was smiling through her tears. None but had to shake hands with us and wish us well, and what surprised me more than anything else was the easiness of Herrill with all our country friends, and how he seemed to enjoy them.

Half the village went with us along Collarmaker's Lane, and across the road by the forge to the footpath which led through the fields to Splicing Oaks.

"It wouldn't pay them Puritans to come after you to-day, master," said Will Dyson to me.

And then I did that which my father had only done twice in his life.

"Will," said I, "go back to 'The Bull' and 'The Five Bells' and give orders that I'll pay for all the beer that is drunk there to-day. This evening a supper at each place, for any who like to go."

We had a big dinner at Splicing Oaks with more than a score of our friends and neighbours to join us, and afterwards Peter Styles made a little speech, full of well wishing, and Will Dyson sang a song. When Will sat

down mother said, " That puts me in mind of something, Will. Why did you start in with the hymn like you did in church? "

" We'll forgive him," said Parson Blechynden.

" But the Squire won't," said mother. " There's a rod in pickle for Will. I saw the Squire looking at him."

" Will thought he had the best voice; he was going to put them right," I said.

Will shook his head.

" No, master, that wasn't the reason. I had to do something, Mistress Bonny was squeezing my hand."

" Why, what harm did you find in that, Will? " I asked.

" Dorothy Farthing was just behind," he said, " and Martha Flatbush was along at the end of the pew."

. . . . . .

The great contest brought its changes to England, and then further changes in their wake. Men rose and fell in that tremendous sea of strife. Pym went to his grave to be succeeded by a greater captain, and Charles, brave, obstinate and unstable, was upborne through years of battle by spirits nobler than his own. How few survived! Sir Thomas Wilford fought his last at Marston Moor—true Englishman, rough of tongue, ashamed of a tender heart. We are bitter to this day—Cynthia and I—that Charles took him to his death.

New needs arose, new men to meet them. England trampled her way to comparative tranquillity and a hundred startling transpositions were to our eyes. One there was very notable to us, though not to come immediately. Herrill had great happiness with Joan at Waveney Manor, plunged into country pursuits with zest, grew wheat which equalled that at Splicing Oaks. He laughed when I said I marvelled such talents and

ambitions could be buried on a farm. "I have reached the summit of all ambitions," said he. Yet presently they sought him out—how could it be otherwise! The very sternness of his reticence commended him. He laughed at their rewards—and forthwith was indispensable.

These three years past Jasper Herrill has been Governor of Dover Castle, and 'tis said no abler commander ever guarded the key of our southern coasts. Joan is unfaltering, receives obeisances, is possessed of a queenly bow, and all the time her dairy at Waveney is as good as it used to be at Splicing Oaks. If my father had but known it! It was Joan, his merry practical Joan, and not his son Geoffrey, who was destined to take high place among the gentlefolk.

I know of no man who can have happier lot than mine. Cynthia is a woman for whom love must grow, and 'tis not only because I think she becomes more beautiful every year. She has a temper, but never a temper with me. She must be weary now and again, but I am not without her bright smile any day—any hour. If every man is selfish, I am no exception and yet pettishness is met with a gentle word, and very often harshness towards others is softened by her sweet spirit. Her laughter is part of the life at Splicing Oaks. Once I told her I was much surprised she did not get tired of me, and the tears were in her eyes as she pulled my head down to hers, and told me I was the most wonderful man in the world.

Making his home at Splicing Oaks, though often to be seen at Waveney Manor, is a battered old soldier, by name Peter Styles. He talks with spirit of the work which is ahead for him when the King comes to his own again. Meanwhile he has learned to build a wheat rick,

and to cut and bind a truss of hay. He leans against a post and watches Lizzie Barton milking the cows, and says he would like to raise courage for the attempt, and fears he will always be a poltroon.

Peter's principal interest, however, is in little Geoffrey; they are sworn cronies. Geoffrey sits on his knee at night listening with wide opened eyes to tales of far adventure.

Peter has bought a toy sword at Canterbury, and I find the two of them every day engaged in a lesson either in the barn or the rickyard. I have doubts as to whether he will spoil the child. I think of the past, and have a wish that Geoffrey should go to Trinity College, Cambridge. But Peter has his own ideas of training.

"I am bringing him up in the right way," he said.

"To what end?" I asked.

"To be a soldier of the King," he replied.

Will Dyson shook his head.

"He will be a King himself one day," he said; "King of this here Splicing Oaks."

Cynthia says she desires her son shall have no better crown.

THE END